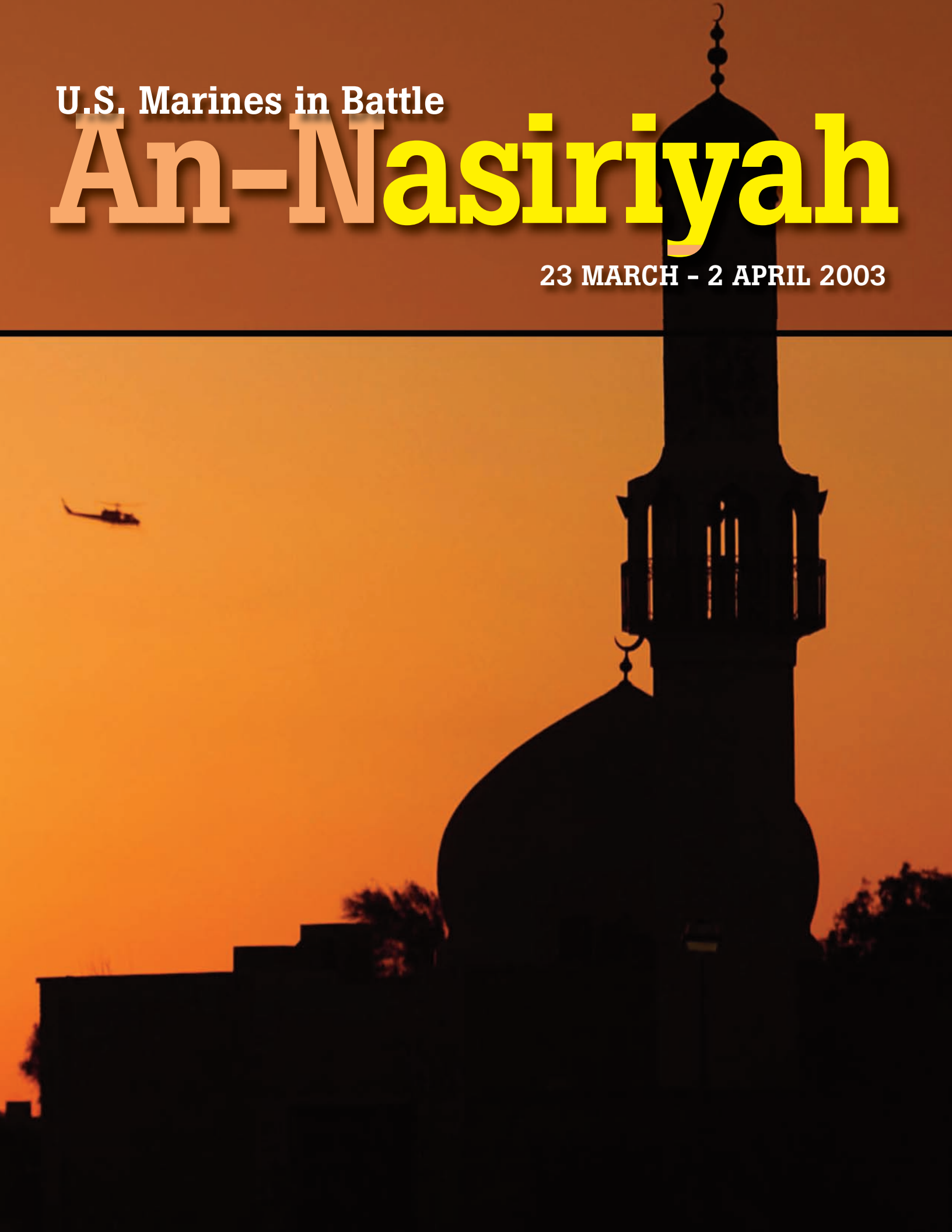


U.S. Marines in Battle

An-Nasiriyah

23 MARCH - 2 APRIL 2003





U.S. Marines from Task Force Tarawa sweep through the military garrison of the Iraqi 23d Infantry Brigade on 25 March 2003 in Nasiriyah. The Iraqi 23d Infantry Brigade was engaged mainly by 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and attached elements. The Marines here are wearing chemical protective Mission Oriented Protective Posture (MOPP) suits over their regular utility uniform for protection against a possible chemical attack.

Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peebles

The Battle of An-Nasiriyah

by Colonel Rod Andrew Jr., USMCR

Iraq and An-Nasiriyah on the Eve of War

On 23 March 2003, 5,800 U.S. Marines and U.S. Navy Corpsmen—the warriors of Task Force Tarawa—began fighting a ferocious battle in the city of an-Nasiriyah, Iraq. As the first large-scale battle fought by U.S. Marines in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Nasiriyah became a test of the Coalition's ability and resolve to defeat a determined, resourceful foe that relied on a combination of conventional units and tactics and irregular forces willing to violate the laws of war. Task Force Tarawa's Marines adapted quickly, and the battle of Nasiriyah, with its asymmetrical warfare, emphasis on combined arms and joint operations, and Coalition forces' ability to react quickly and aggressively against unexpected enemy tactics became emblematic of the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom campaign.

Nasiriyah lies in a date-growing region along the banks of the Euphrates River in Dhi Qar Province about 225 miles southeast of Baghdad. Its population, made up almost entirely of Shi'a Muslims, was an estimated 560,000 in 2003, making it the fourth most populous city in the country. It was founded in 1840 near the ruins of the ancient city of Ur, the birthplace of Abraham.

The events that brought the Marines to Nasiriyah, however, were far more current. Only six days before they stormed into the city, President George W. Bush had issued an ultimatum giving Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his two sons 48 hours to leave Iraq. The United States had viewed the Iraqi government with heightened concern since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Hussein's regime was believed to sponsor global terrorism and also to be building and stockpiling weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons for use against its neighbors and Western nations.

Soon after 11 September, it became clear that the immediate source of the terrorist who carried out those attacks was Afghanistan rather than Iraq. Even during the offensive against the Taliban in Afghanistan, however, the Bush administration anticipated the need to topple

Hussein's regime, leading the U.S. military to start planning for a possible invasion of Iraq. Hussein had ignored or violated 16 United Nations resolutions, many of them requiring him to disclose what had become of the mass destruction weapons his country had once possessed and to allow international inspectors to search for them or verify their destruction. In light of Hussein's intransigence, the Bush administration concluded, as did many experts around the world, that Iraq still harbored those weapons, and with aggressive intent.¹

Planning and Deployment

Task Force Tarawa, whose name was a colorful designation for 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade (2d MEB), had existed as a standing, fighting organization for less than three months. The 2d MEB originally consisted only of a staff and commander, Brigadier General Richard F. Natonski. Marine expeditionary brigade staffs had been discontinued due to budget cuts of the 1990s and were only revived in 2000. When the Marine Corps revived them, it tried to do so economically by assigning Marine expeditionary brigade billet titles to the staff personnel of II Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF). Thus, every staff officer and staff noncommissioned officer of 2d MEB had another, primary duty as a member of II MEF's staff. Until December 2002, the attention they were able to devote to Marine expeditionary brigade planning was limited by their primary duties as members of the II MEF staff.²

Marine planners had long known, however, that 2d MEB would have a role to play in Operations Plan 1003V, the contingency plan to liberate Iraq. It would end up being one of four major combat organizations under I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF), including 1st Marine Division, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, and the 1 (United Kingdom) Armoured Division. I MEF in turn would end up fighting alongside the U.S. Army V Corps. More detailed planning commenced in September 2002; at that time, 2d MEB was referred to as Task Force South. As planning proceeded, 2d MEB's anticipated mission was to arrive in Kuwait after hostilities commenced, relieve 1st Marine Division in the Umm Qasr oil fields, and block in the direction of Basra. This would facilitate a rapid march north by 1st Marine Division, which in turn would draw attention and Iraqi combat power away from the Coalition main effort, which was the 3d Infantry

On the Cover: A UH-1 Huey helicopter cuts through the sky as the sun sets over Nasiriyah.

Photo by SSgt Chad McMeen

Division of the Army's V Corps. This plan was further articulated at planning conferences in mid-December in Kuwait and Qatar.³

Task Force Tarawa

Around the time of the December 2002 planning conferences, I MEF commander Lieutenant General James T. Conway asked Brigadier General Richard F. Natonski if he would like to choose a different name for the 2d MEB. A history major in college, Natonski had a keen sense of the historical importance of what he and his Marines were involved in. Conscious of being an East Coast (2d Marine Division) unit as part of a West Coast Marine expeditionary force, Natonski was intrigued with the idea of giving 2d MEB a name that evoked its 2d Marine Division heritage.

Natonski asked for ideas from the Marine Corps History Division, but none of the suggestions appealed to him. One day while visiting the I MEF Headquarters building, he noticed a plaque in the lobby commemorating the battle of Tarawa. Natonski decided to adopt the moniker "Task Force Tarawa" for 2d MEB, a name that recalled the legendary battle fought by 2d Marine Division against the Japanese in the Gilbert Islands in November 1943.⁴

It was also during the fall of 2002 that planners began to designate the forces that would constitute 2d MEB once it became a combat unit. The command element contained personnel drawn from the II MEF staff, 2d Intelligence Battalion, 2d Radio Battalion, 8th Communications Battalion, 2d Force Service Support

Group, 4th Civil Affairs Groups, 2d Marine Liaison Element, and 2d Force Reconnaissance Company. The commander would be Brigadier General Natonski, a career infantry officer who had previously commanded at the battalion and Marine expeditionary unit levels. As a commander, he had led units in operations in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kuwait. Natonski was a large, powerfully built man with a deep voice. He spoke deliberately and forcefully but combined this strong demeanor with courtesy and tact.

The ground combat element was the 2d Regimental Combat Team (RCT-2), which in turn was built around the nucleus of 2d Marine Regiment, based at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. The commanding officer of 2d Marines, Colonel Ronald L. Bailey, would command RCT-2. Bailey was a seasoned officer with broad experience in operational units. The bulk of his regiment had just completed a combined arms exercise in Twentynine Palms, California. The regimental staff and a large proportion of the regiment were still preparing for cold-weather training in Bridgeport, California, as late as early December. They had hints that they might be deploying to a completely different environment in Iraq instead, but nevertheless could not ignore preparations for Bridgeport. Thus the 2d Marine Regiment was in the position of having to prepare for parallel and mutually exclusive missions. Not until the planning conference in mid-December did Colonel Bailey learn that the bulk of his regiment would indeed be going to Iraq. From that point, he had a little over a week to call his Marines off holiday leave and get his regiment embarked and ready to sail.⁵

Regimental Combat Team 2 had three infantry battalions. The 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was led by Lieutenant Colonel Rickey L. Grabowski, a former enlisted Marine and drill instructor and son of a Vietnam veteran who had subsequently spent a career as an officer in the U.S. National Guard. Tough, disciplined, and methodical, Grabowski worked hard to ensure that training emphasized small-unit leadership, particularly encouraging subordinates to take the initiative.⁶ His battalion had recently returned from a combined arms exercise. It was augmented by Company A, 2d Amphibious Assault Vehicle Battalion, commanded by Captain William E. Blanchard, and was the only battalion in the task force that would ride into battle in FMC AAV-7A1s (amphibious assault vehicles, or "tracks") and thus be "track-mounted." Because of this, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, would form the task force's vanguard during the invasion of Iraq and bear a large brunt of the heaviest fighting on the first day in Nasiriyah.⁷



Photo by LCpl Bryan J. Nealy
BGen Richard F. Natonski, commander of Task Force Tarawa, speaking to a reporter in an-Nasiriyah.



U. S. Marine Corps Map

The 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Royal P. Mortenson, the son of a World War II Marine who had been wounded on Guam. Articulate and charismatic, Mortenson was determined that none of his Marines would die due to his mistakes or neglect. His Marines had recently completed cold-weather training in the mountains around Bridgeport. Despite the now-likely deployment in Iraq, Mortenson nevertheless believed that the training had been useful because it had encouraged and naturally fostered small-unit cohesion and attention to detail. The battalion had

been preparing for deployment as part of 1st Marine Division, so it was at full strength and at a high level of training and cohesion.⁸

Lieutenant Colonel Paul B. "Brent" Dunahoe commanded 3d Battalion, 2d Marines. He was a Virginia Military Institute graduate whom one officer described as "tough and pragmatic."⁹ Only days before deploying, this battalion reached deployable strength by the addition of more than 160 brand new arrivals—second lieutenants just graduated from Infantry Officers Course and raw enlisted Marines straight from the School of Infantry.

Some of the latter had not even completed the full course but had been yanked out of training early and sent to Dunahoe's battalion.¹⁰

The artillery unit was 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Glenn T. Starnes, a Texas A&M graduate described as "quietly professional and confident," but also quietly intense.¹¹ One of Starnes's main concerns was the performance of the new family of digital communications and fire support equipment. He was also apprehensive about what he considered a lack of necessary logistical capabilities for a unit about to go into combat.¹²

Task Force Tarawa also enjoyed the support of a company of tanks. Company A, 8th Tank Battalion, was a Reserve company based at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Its commander was Major William P. Peeples, a city planner in Avon, Indiana. Brigadier General Natonski recalled that "we were very fortunate with our support from the Marine Corps Reserves."¹³ Major Peeples's tank company mobilized, boarded buses, and arrived in Camp Lejeune within three days of receiving a phone call to mobilize. A reconnaissance company from San Antonio, Texas, had nearly an identical timeline. There was also a civil affairs group detachment from the Reserves, and augmentation by Reserve officers and enlisted personnel was vital for the 2d MEB staff as well.¹⁴

The combat service support element was Combat Service Support Battalion 22 (CSSB-22), 2d Force Service Support Group. Initially, Task Force Tarawa also had an aviation combat element, Marine Air Group 29 (MAG-29). The task force deployed with 7,089 Marines and sailors. Upon arriving in Kuwait, however, Task Force Tarawa had to detach MAG-29, thus losing its own organic air assets. The task force also lost formal operational control of CSSB-22 to 1st Force Service Support Group, although its first assigned tactical task in Iraq was direct support of Task Force Tarawa. Thus, by the time the task force crossed the line of departure into Iraq, it was simply a ground maneuver element, not a Marine air-ground task force. It then had roughly 5,800 Marines and sailors.¹⁵

It was not until late December that subordinate commanders of what would become Task Force Tarawa got confirmation that they were indeed deploying as part of that unit. Once the word got out, things happened quickly. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Mortenson, commander of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, which was originally envisioned as flying to Iraq to become part of 1st Marine Division, found out on 29 December that his battalion was instead sailing as part of 2d MEB. The entire battalion was called off Christmas leave and told to return

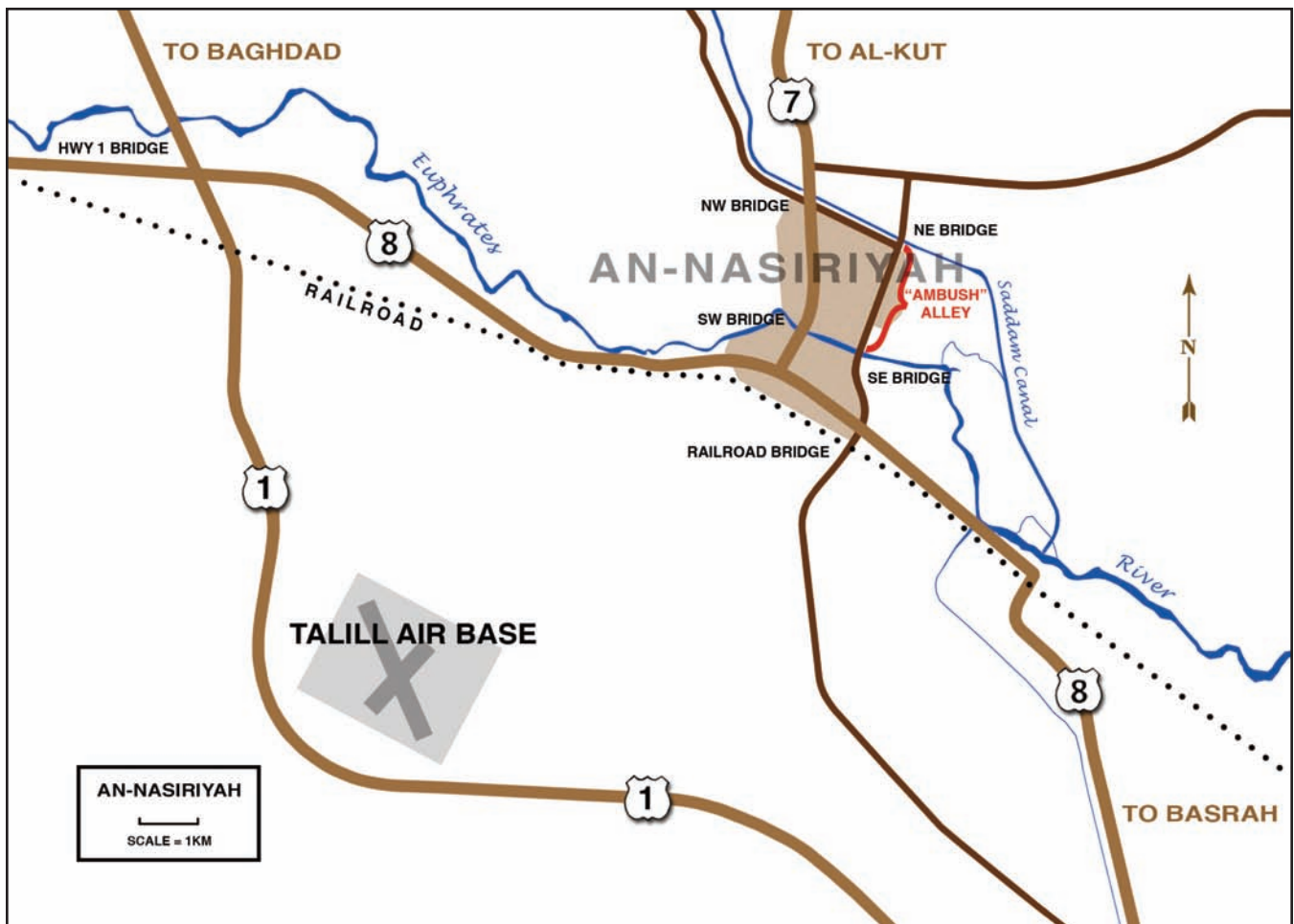
on 2 January. Information on the morning of the 3d, the Marines and sailors learned that they would be on ships by 5 January, and there was no way to know when they would be back.¹⁶

On 6 January 2003, 2d MEB was officially activated. By 9 January, loading began on the ships of Amphibious Task Force East at Norfolk, Virginia, and Morehead City, Wilmington, and Onslow Beach, North Carolina. Amphibious Task Force East shipping consisted of the USS *Saipan* (LHA-2), USS *Bataan* (LHD-5), USS *Kearsarge* (LHD-3), USS *Ponce* (LPD-15), USS *Portland* (LSD-37), USS *Gunston Hall* (LSD-44), and USS *Ashland* (LSD-48), all under the command of Rear Admiral Michael P. Nowakowski, USN. On 15 January, Amphibious Task Force East and Task Force Tarawa sailed for the Persian Gulf.¹⁷

Two days after sailing, the mission of Task Force Tarawa changed. Initially, it had been to relieve the 1st Marine Division in the Umm Qasr oil fields in the southeastern corner of Iraq, allowing the division to continue driving north toward Baghdad. Task Force Tarawa's new mission was to secure bridges to facilitate the movement of the rest of I MEF north toward Baghdad and to preserve the combat power of 1st Marine Division. Lieutenant General James T. Conway did not want the division, the main effort of the MEF, expending its combat power in seizing and holding bridges and supply routes. Task Force Tarawa, then, would be part of the supporting effort for I MEF. In turn, I MEF was the supporting effort for the main effort, the 3d Infantry Division of the Army's V Corps, which would be advancing on the Marines' left. Thus, Task Force Tarawa's anticipated role was to be the support of the support of the main effort. Few if any anticipated that in performing this mission, Task Force Tarawa would fight one of the defining battles of the campaign.¹⁸

By the middle of January, 2d MEB was at sea and headed for Iraq. Knowing that fighting skills can degrade while on ship, leaders throughout the task force made plans to maintain as much of their combat proficiency as possible. Each unit conducted on-board training, including live-fire training; physical fitness; small-unit leadership training; nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare defense training; tactical decision games; mission planning; and staff rehearsals.¹⁹

One concern of Rear Admiral Nowakowski and Brigadier General Natonski during the sea voyage was the passage of four narrow sea lanes. During transits of the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Bab-el- Mandeb near the port Aden, Yemen, and the Strait of Hormuz, the brigade assumed a rigid force protection posture, with ships



Map illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

posting robust guard units and Marines manning anti-aircraft guns, machine guns, and sniper rifles to guard against possible terrorist attacks at these choke points. Along the way, elements of the task force participated in a one-day tactical air control exercise in Djibouti on 7-8 February using fire support teams and mortars to practice employment of tactical aviation and close air support.²⁰

Task Force Tarawa and Amphibious Task Force East arrived at Kuwait Naval Base on 15 February 2003. Over the next three days, the units of the task force off-loaded and occupied their sectors in Tactical Assembly Area Coyote. Task Force Tarawa's camps within the assembly area were named Camp Shoup and Camp Ryan in honor of heroes of the Marines' 1943 Tarawa campaign. Most of the forces traveled from the naval base to their new staging areas by bus, but 2,600 personnel were transported by helicopter, a trip of 95 miles. This airborne movement was conducted as a force protection measure. From mid-February to mid-March, the Marines were able to take advantage of nearly 30 days of zeroing and calibrating weapons, live-fire exercises, and other training at Udari Range Complex and in other areas in Kuwait.²¹

To the Highway 1 Bridge

On 17 March, the task force received its order to move to Assembly Area Hawkins near the Kuwait-Iraq border on 19 March. Brigadier General Natonski's Marines made up the far left flank of I MEF, with 1st Marine Division on its right and V Corps on its left. Available battlespace was limited; in fact, Assembly Area Hawkins was actually located within V Corps' assigned area. In the first day or two of the invasion, Task Force Tarawa was forced to use battlespace "borrowed" from V Corps as it advanced north to accomplish its first mission. That was to secure Jalibah Airfield, on order, to facilitate the establishment of a logistics base, code-named Logistics Support Area Viper. On order, the task force would then conduct a relief in place with elements of the Army's 3d Infantry Division at a key bridge where Highway 1 crossed the Euphrates River about 12 kilometers west of the city of Nasiriyah. This bridge became known as the "Highway 1 bridge."²²

Planners at I MEF and V Corps headquarters considered Highway 1 a main supply route facilitating the further advance of Coalition forces. However, it was not

enough. If the entire expeditionary force and large elements of V Corps were dependent on this one route, bottlenecking would occur, slowing the advance and leaving Coalition forces densely packed and vulnerable to weapons of mass destruction. Having two axes of advance would give I MEF more freedom of action and keep the enemy guessing. Thus, by 6 February, nine days before Task Force Tarawa came ashore in Kuwait, Lieutenant General Conway and his staff had formulated another mission for Task Force Tarawa: be prepared to secure crossing sites on the eastern side of Nasiriyah.

Nasiriyah was a major population center and was situated, as Brigadier General Natonski put it, at “a confluence of all the Army and Marine forces going into Iraq.”²³ A railroad, several highways, and two major waterways converged in or around the city. There were two sets of bridges, or “crossing sites,” in Nasiriyah. These bridges spanned the Euphrates River in the southern section of the city, as did the Saddam Canal, which ran along its northern border. The western bridge over the Euphrates (the “southwestern bridge”) and the western bridge over the Saddam Canal (the “northwestern bridge”) were at either end of a route that would take vehicles through the most built-up, densely populated sector of the city. There was a risk that securing those bridges might involve the task force being drawn unnecessarily into intense urban fighting.²⁴

Instead, Task Force Tarawa was to seize the eastern bridge over the Euphrates (“southeastern bridge”) and the eastern bridge over the Saddam Canal (“northeastern bridge”). Connecting these two bridges was a stretch of road four kilometers long that Army planners had nicknamed “Ambush Alley” based on the possibility of an ambush of any Coalition forces attempting to use it. Despite the foreboding moniker, few expected determined enemy resistance in Nasiriyah. Resistance by the Iraqi army had been weak to that point, and it seemed significant that the Iraqis had not destroyed the bridges in and around Nasiriyah, a measure that would have been expected of a defending force that planned to offer determined resistance.

The control of the two eastern bridges and Ambush Alley would allow I MEF forces to travel north and northwest along Highway 8, then leave Highway 8 and navigate the eastern outskirts of the city via Ambush Alley and the two eastern bridges. Once over the Saddam Canal, those Marine forces could then turn west, intersect with Highway 7, and travel north in the direction of al-Kut and their next objectives. By seizing and holding these bridges, Task Force Tarawa would allow 1st Marine

Division to preserve its momentum and combat power for the bigger fights closer to Baghdad. The desired goal was that the main supply route would be secured, the flow of logistical support to 1st Marine Division would be unhindered, and that Task Force Tarawa would be poised for follow-on combat operations against the enemy farther north.²⁵

Intelligence told Brigadier General Natonski and his staff that Nasiriyah was held by the *11th Division* of the Iraqi army and paramilitaries (*Saddam Fedayeen* and *Ba'ath party militia*). The *Saddam Fedayeen* were fanatically loyal to the Hussein regime, though poorly equipped and trained for conventional warfare. They were known as thugs and henchmen who murderously repressed disaffected elements within the regime and threatened or shot Iraqi army soldiers who were unwilling to fight. The *Ba'ath Party Militia* were similarly organized and played a similar role.²⁶

American intelligence was aware of the presence of these paramilitaries but generally underestimated their willingness to fight. One intelligence estimate predicted that the paramilitaries would don their civilian attire and leave the city as American forces approached. Indeed, there had been little Iraqi resistance to that point. Some have speculated that the Iraqis had been caught off guard by the Coalition invasion due to the lack of a prolonged air assault like that conducted in the initial phase of Operation Desert Storm in 1991. By the time Task Force Tarawa reached Nasiriyah several days later, however, the Iraqis had had time to organize a defense. Additionally, the ambush of an Army maintenance convoy in the city hours before the Marines' arrival in Nasiriyah would alert and embolden the Iraqi forces defending the city. It also turned out that there were other Iraqi forces in the area besides the *11th Division*, *Fedayeen*, and *Ba'ath militia*. Elements of the *51st Mechanized Infantry Division*, some *Republican Guard* forces, and the *Al Quds Division* (local militia loyal to Saddam Hussein's regime) were also in the area. The result was that Task Force Tarawa encountered far tougher resistance at Nasiriyah than anyone on the Coalition side had foreseen.²⁷

Despite higher headquarters' lack of emphasis on paramilitaries, there is evidence that some officers at lower levels expected that those enemy formations were precisely the ones that would offer the most resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Brent Dunahoe, commander of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, and his operations officer, Major Daniel T. Canfield Jr., reasoned that those organizations would lose the most from the overthrow of Saddam

Hussein's regime. In his "Commander's Intent" statement given to his battalion the night before crossing the line of departure in Kuwait and marching toward Nasiriyah, Dunahoe announced that he saw "the enemy's main source of strength in . . . An Nasiriyah as the organized militias and paramilitary forces, such as the Ba'ath Party Militia, the Saddam Fedayeen, and others loyal to Saddam. . . . They have the most to lose in a regime change." Dunahoe predicted that these forces were likely to employ "obstacles, ambush, the employment of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), or asymmetrical attacks." Dunahoe's prognostication, except for the use of weapons of mass destruction, proved accurate.²⁸

By the time Task Force Tarawa crossed the line of departure, it was still unclear whether its Marines would have to fight within the city of Nasiriyah itself. Between 15 and 17 March, the plan was revised yet again, and the seizure of the eastern bridges and "Ambush Alley" corridor was changed to a "be prepared to" mission that would only be executed "if the conditions were right," as one major put it.²⁹

Task Force Tarawa crossed the line of departure on 21 March and executed four breaching lanes in V Corps' sector. By 1300 on 22 March, it had traveled 150 kilometers to a position north of Jalibah Airfield and east of the intersection of Highways 1 and 8.* To this point, the most vexing obstacle in Task Force Tarawa's advance had been neither the terrain nor the enemy, but the constricted battlespace. The V Corps needed the main north-south road in the sector, so Task Force Tarawa advanced literally cross-country. The Marines actually made far better time than they would have had they been allowed to use the main road, which was literally bumper to bumper with Army refueler trucks. It would have been impassable for Task Force Tarawa.³⁰

Despite these difficulties, the Coalition advance was ahead of its timetable. During the afternoon of the 22d, elements of Task Force Tarawa received light and inaccurate indirect fire. Counterbattery radar located the targets, and the artillery of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, responded with two batteries firing a total of 24 dual-purpose improved conventional munitions.** Meanwhile, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, took 50 enemy prisoners of war

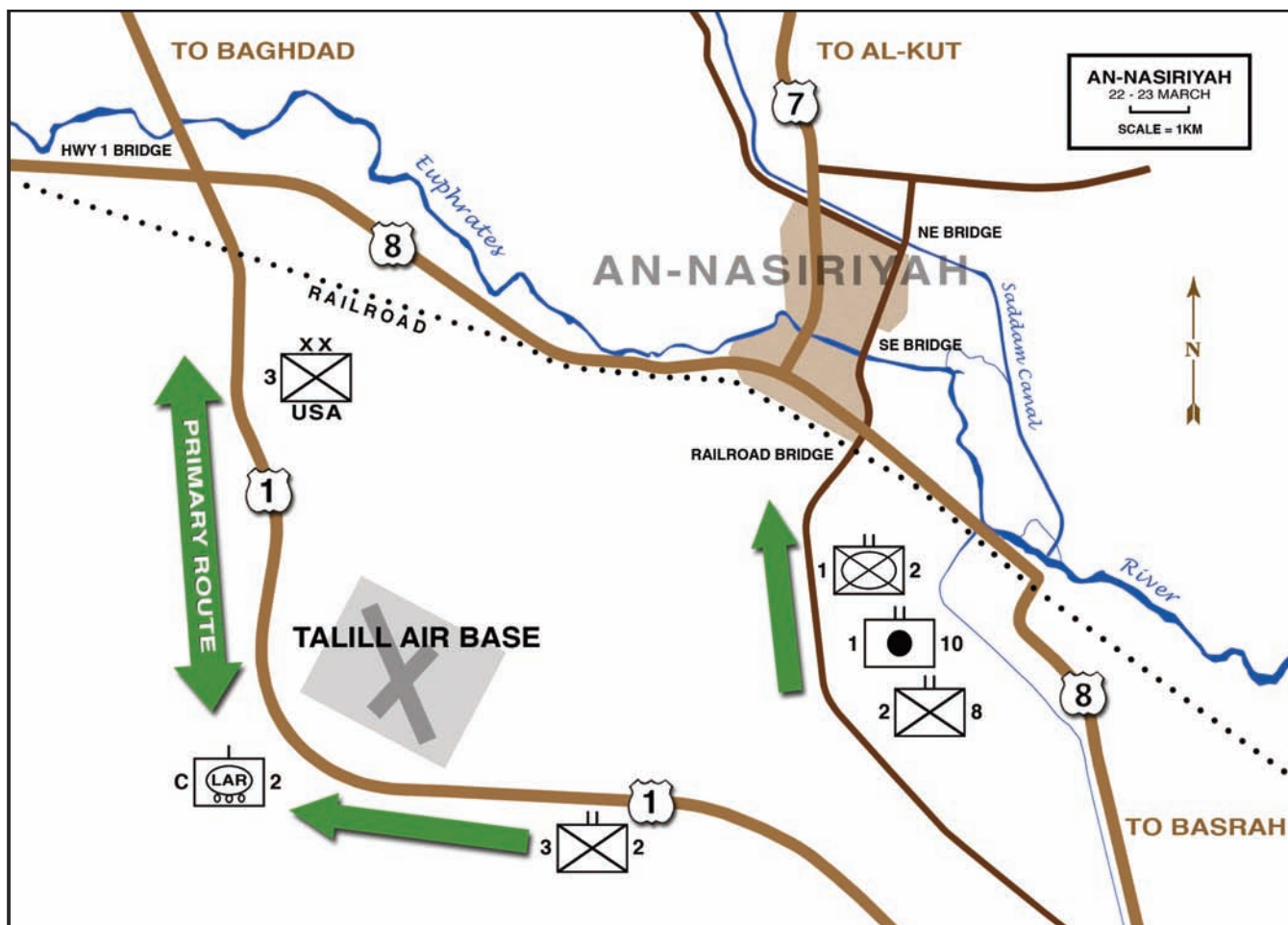
who surrendered themselves and their weapons. On the evening of the 22d, Brigadier General Natonski received MEF Fragmentary Order 17, which directed Task Force Tarawa to secure Jalibah Airfield and conduct a relief in place with elements of 3d Infantry Division at the Highway 1 bridge no later than 0500 the next morning, 23 March. Also, the task force was to "be prepared" to secure the bridges on the eastern side of Nasiriyah, with an anticipated time of approximately 1000 the same day. The MEF's Fragmentary Order 17 further informed Natonski and his staff that 3d Infantry Division had "defeated the 11th Infantry Division," and that the 51st Mechanized Infantry Division had been defeated as well. This news confirmed in the task force leaders' minds the impression that Nasiriyah would not be an overly difficult fight.³¹

That night, RCT-2 commander Colonel Ronald Bailey received word to attend an orders group at the Task Force Tarawa command post. By the time the meeting ended at around midnight, he had verbal orders for 23 March. Later he received them in written form: first, execute the relief in place at the Highway 1 bridge no later than 0430; second, conduct an attack no later than 0700 to seize the eastern bridges of Nasiriyah and secure them no later than 1000.³²

Task Force Tarawa had advanced as far it was authorized by this point and was ahead of its schedule. Since the timetable had been accelerated, however, elements of RCT-2 were beginning to feel the strain. The pushed deadlines, constricted battlespace and maneuver room, clogged roads, lack of sleep, and need to refuel all put pressure on Colonel Bailey and RCT-2. Bailey asked for three things: more time, intelligence, and fuel. At this point, most Marines in RCT-2 had gone 24 hours with virtually no sleep. Perhaps more critically, because "lowboy" transport trucks had not arrived to carry the tanks in the cross-country march to Jalibah, fuel was extremely low, especially for the tanks. Brigadier General Natonski, however, could not allow Bailey more time because of the pressure to advance that was coming down from higher headquarters. Though his Marines needed rest, Bailey recalled being told, "Hey, I guess we'll be going on adrenaline."³³ Nor could the Task Force Tarawa staff give him any detailed intelligence information, other than to expect nothing more than small-arms fire. There was also no definite information on refueling, though refuelers arrived several hours later. Bailey needed to get his Company C, 2d LAR Battalion, and 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, to the Highway 1 bridge, 80 kilometers away. He suddenly felt like he had been put under tremendous pressure but consciously told himself, "okay, [we've] got a mission, let's go for it."³⁴

* In this study, all times are given in local Baghdad, or "Charlie" time, even though many of the sources use times from the "Zulu" time zone.

** Dual Purpose Improved Conventional Munitions (DPICM) refers to a family of artillery projectiles (including the M483A1, M80, and M864 rounds designed for 155mm howitzers) that are particularly deadly. They are designed to explode above the target and release grenade-like submunitions that are effective against both armor and personnel.



Map illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

In the interest of saving time, Colonel Bailey and his staff decided to forego a meeting with his battalion commanders and instead passed the word to them by radio. The 2d Force Reconnaissance Company, led by Lieutenant Colonel James E. Reilly, dashed ahead to make liaison with the Army's 3d Brigade Combat Team (3d BCT) of the 3d Infantry Division at the Highway 1 bridge. Shortly afterward, Colonel Bailey and Company C, 2d LAR Battalion, took off on a "hell-for-leather" ride to the bridge as well, with 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, following about an hour later. With the northbound lane clogged by hundreds of Army vehicles and at a virtual standstill, Bailey led the convoy northward in the dark, with no lights, often in the southbound lane into what would have been oncoming traffic. At one point, they traveled for some distance off-road. Sleep-deprived Marine drivers had to dodge stalled Army vehicles and halted convoys that had been left parked in the travel lanes with no flashers on. Several Marines on Bailey's staff began referring to the route as "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride" after an amusement park ride and video game popular at the time.³⁵

Bailey and elements of 2d Force Reconnaissance Company reached the Army position at the bridge sometime around 0230. At 0430, Company C, 2d LAR Battalion, assisted and guided in by the reconnaissance company, relieved the Army tank company of the 3d Brigade Combat Team that held the Highway 1 bridge.³⁶

Meanwhile, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, was having difficulty weaving its way through stalled Army convoys. At approximately 0100, the Marines veered to the right and slowed down to pass a convoy stalled on the left side of the road. One Humvee failed to adjust and crashed into the back of a parked Army truck. The driver, Sergeant Nicolas M. Hodson, was killed, and the three passengers—First Lieutenant Dustin P. Ferrell, Lance Corporal Shawn T. Eshelman, and Lance Corporal Bret R. Westerlink—were seriously injured and evacuated by helicopter. As a result of the congestion on the highway,

* The command chronology for the 2d Marines says the relief in place was complete at 0300. Task Force Tarawa's "Chronicle of the Combat Actions at An Nasiriyah" notes that it was complete at 0430, "one half hour ahead of schedule." This time matches with the recollection of LtCol Reilly. LtCol James E. Reilly and SFC Thomas Smith interview with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 13Apr03 (Marine Corps Historical Center, Quantico, VA).

the battalion's movement was delayed by roughly four hours. Nevertheless, shortly after 0700, the battalion established its assigned blocking positions along Highway 8, east of the Highway 1 bridge and facing east.³⁷

Though RCT-2 elements were able to accomplish the relief in place on the Highway 1 bridge on time without enemy-inflicted casualties, there were several cases of enemy contact. While clearing the western side of the bridge, the Marines of Company C, 2d LAR Battalion, captured numerous arms and ammunition caches and later shot two Iraqi soldiers who were probing their defensive position. Later that night, elements of 2d Force Reconnaissance Company were moving from the intersection of Highways 1 and 8 eastward along Highway 8 toward Nasiriyah. As they neared a power plant, Lieutenant Colonel Reilly and his reconnaissance Marines received fire from enemy small arms, light machine guns, rockets, and mortars. The Marines killed approximately 20 to 30 Iraqi soldiers while suffering no casualties. As they returned toward the bridge, traveling westward, Reilly and his Marines found and destroyed two trucks carrying armed men and also navigated a recently emplaced obstacle that had not been there earlier. Apparently, the Iraqis had intended to box in and destroy the patrol, ambushing it at the power plant on the eastern side of the box and blocking its escape to the west with obstacles and fire. But they had been too slow in putting together their trap.³⁸

As Lieutenant Colonel Reilly and his troops proceeded back to Highway 1, they encountered the Marines of Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe's 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, occupying their assigned blocking position five kilometers east of the intersection of Highways 1 and 8. Reilly and Dunahoe exchanged intelligence and information that aided Dunahoe's battalion in an engagement later that evening.³⁹

Throughout the day of 23 March, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, consolidated its positions, sent out patrols, and acquired much-needed fuel and rations. At approximately 2000, two vehicles approached the checkpoint of Company L, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines. Six individuals dismounted, and Marines looking through night vision sights believed that the men were carrying rifles. However, because of the presence of U.S. Special Forces, Free Iraqi Forces, and possibly other "friendlylies" in the area, the Marines of Company L, under Captain Gerald R. Thomas, did not fire. Moments later, however, mortar rounds began to land near Companies I and K and creep closer to the Marines. There was momentary confusion over whether the rounds were enemy fire or the result of a "danger-close" mission fired by

friendly forces in support of the rifle companies. As leaders confirmed that the mortar fire was enemy-directed, Marines from Company L engaged one of the vehicles with a Raytheon/Lockheed FGM-148 Javelin antitank missile at a range of 600 meters. The Javelin missile destroyed the vehicle, and Marines engaged the other vehicle with a .50-caliber sniper rifle. The battalion used 81mm illumination rounds to attempt to locate the hostile mortars, and the battalion air officer, Captain Harold W. Qualkinbush, called upon a section of two Bell AH-1W Cobra helicopters to reconnoiter the area. Using its infrared sights, the Cobras located two abandoned mortar tubes still radiating infrared energy about 1,500 meters east of the battalion and just north of the Euphrates River. As soon as the sound of the Cobras' rotor blades filled the night air, the Iraqi mortarmen scattered, and the mortars ceased firing. Marines later found two abandoned vehicles with more than 140 rifles, 9 machine guns, 8 rockets, ammunition, and other supplies. They destroyed them all with demolition charges.⁴⁰

23 March—Into the City

While 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, and the light armored reconnaissance company were effecting the relief in place on the Highway 1 bridge, the rest of RCT-2 was attempting to refuel and preparing to resume its march north to seize the bridges on the eastern side of Nasiriyah. Prior to MEF Fragmentary Order 17, the requirement to seize the eastern bridges was only a "be prepared to" mission. Task Force Tarawa had done extensive planning for this anticipated mission. However, there was some thought among the battalion commanders and brigade staff that if these bridges and the city were strongly held, then RCT-2 would just secure Jalibah Airfield and make sure that the Highway 1 route was open for 1st Marine Division to pass through. As Brigadier General Natonski recalled, "our intent was never to get involved in the urban area." The last thing he wanted to do was "get bogged down" in a house-to-house fight.⁴¹ Even if there was only light resistance, the plan was to take only the easternmost bridges rather than directly entering the more built-up area around the western bridges and the route that went straight into the heart of the city. Commanders throughout RCT-2 understood that a house-to-house urban fight was not desired. As Lieutenant Colonel Rickey Grabowski recalled, if "the enemy situation in Nasiriyah was more permissive vice nonpermissive . . . there was a good chance we could go up there to seize the bridges in order to open that Route 7." As it turned out, "the night before the attack, we got the word that we were going to push to go seize the

bridges. . . I'm not certain what . . . the intel[ligence] at the higher level was, whether it was permissive or nonpermissive, but we got the order to continue in the morning to seize those bridges.”⁴²

In the early hours of 23 March, the Marines still anticipated only light resistance in Nasiriyah. Moreover, it seems clear that when the mission to seize the eastern bridges was changed from a “be prepared to” to an “execute” mission, this news did not reach all the commanders in the regimental combat team. Units including 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and other elements were moving north toward the bridges by 0300, with 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, in the lead. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski, commander of 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was one who had not gotten the word, believing that the only stated mission was to defend Highway 1. As the morning progressed, however, and as 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and other RCT-2 elements began to make enemy contact, an even greater sense of urgency was imparted from senior commanders to Brigadier General Natonski and then to the regiment and the battalions. Natonski was told that within “several hours” of his task force taking the bridges that 1st Marine Division would be coming through. Grabowski recalled that “it wasn’t until we got up to our first engagement, which was southeast of the city, where we received medium machine-gun fire and we were also receiving artillery and mortar fire that we were basically . . . told that hey, they needed the bridges because we had two regimental combat teams that were going to pass through that day.”⁴³

Just before 0600, Colonel Bailey ordered Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski’s 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, to move north from its assigned position at the 20 northing line to the 22 northing to make room for the emplacement of the artillery of the 1st Battalion, 10th Marines.⁴⁴ Grabowski’s battalion was in the lead because it was the battalion that had mechanized assets—its Marines were mounted on tracks, and it had the tank company attached to it. Behind 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and initially behind the artillery, was Lieutenant Colonel Royal Mortenson’s 2d Battalion.

The lead element for 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was Combined Anti-Armor Team 1. Each battalion formed a Combined Anti-Armor Platoon from elements of its Weapons Company. These “CAAT” platoons were ad hoc, task-organized elements that included vehicle-mounted heavy machine gun and anti-armor assets. Typically, each CAAT platoon included eight “TOW vehicles” (Humvees specially designed to mount the Hughes M220 Tube-Launched, Optically Tracked, Wire Guided Missiles);

seven Humvees mounted with either .50-caliber machine guns or MK19 grenade launchers; and one FGM-148 Javelin missile section with eight missile systems. These combined anti-armor platoons were divided into two sections, CAAT Team One and CAAT Team Two.⁴⁵ In 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, the combined anti-armor platoon commander was First Lieutenant Brian S. Letendre, who also personally led CAAT Team Two. Letendre’s CAAT Team One was led by Staff Sergeant Troy F. Schielein.



Photo by LCpl Gordon A. Rouse
Marines in Nasiriyah mounted on a High Mobility Multi-Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee) designed for the M220 TOW missile launcher and also mounted with a Fabrique Nationale M240G 7.62mm machine gun.

Next in the line of march for 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was Team Tank, consisting of two platoons of tanks and one platoon of track-mounted infantry from Company B. Then came the Forward Command Post, 81mm mortar platoon, Team Mech (two platoons of track-mounted infantry from Company B and one platoon of tanks), Company A (track-mounted), and Company C (track-mounted). Bringing up the rear of the column were the Main Command Post, logistics trains, and Combined Anti-Armor Team 2.⁴⁶

Besides the Humvees belonging to Combined Anti-Armor Team 1, the vanguard of the regimental combat team was the tank company led by Major William Peeples, the city planner and former logistics officer from Indiana, and Gunnery Sergeant Randy L. Howard, a tanker and veteran of the first Gulf War. Most officers in the regimental combat team and Task Force Tarawa staff understood the value of tanks in urban terrain. By the end of the day, they would never forget it.

About 13 kilometers south of Nasiriyah, Major Peeples’s tank column began receiving small-arms and indirect fire as it passed between two houses. Additionally, challenging terrain made the tanks’ overwatch advance



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples

An M1A1 Abrams tank belonging to Company A, 8th Tank Battalion, and a FMC AAV-7A1 Amphibious Assault Vehicle attached to Company C, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, were among the first units to traverse "Ambush Alley" on 23 March.

technique difficult. One tank bogged down in swampy ground and had to be pulled out by a retriever. The rest of the column was taking fire, pausing to engage enemy targets, and calling in mortar fire and artillery support from 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, which had two batteries firing by 0700.⁴⁷

Shortly after getting all of his tanks back on the road, Major Peeples observed a smoking and damaged Humvee headed south in his direction. In the vehicle were three soldiers, including Captain Troy K. King, U.S. Army, commander of the 507th Maintenance Company, attached to a MIM-104 Patriot missile battery. Having been traveling for approximately 36 hours, the company had mistakenly veered off Highway 8 and then turned toward the city into enemy-held territory. It had entered the city, crossed the Euphrates and the Saddam Canal, turned west on Route 7, reversed course, passed to the east of the eastern Saddam Canal bridge that it had crossed earlier, reversed course again, and finally turned south to retrace its steps through Ambush Alley. As it was traveling south, it ran a gauntlet of fire from the Saddam Canal to well south of the Euphrates River bridge. The shaken captain told Peeples that he had taken casualties and that much of the rest of his company was pinned down to the north in need of rescue and medical assistance.

Peeples decided to take his entire company north to assist the ambushed soldiers and informed personnel at the 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, command post. Along the way, Team Tank, Combined Anti-Armor Team 1, and two tracked vehicles from Company A ran into Iraqi resistance and destroyed some enemy artillery, one tank, and some anti-aircraft weapons. With the help of two AH-1 Cobra

helicopter gunships that were on their way south to Basra and another supporting attack by a pair of Boeing F/A-18 Hornet jets, Peeples and his men were able to rescue 10 stranded soldiers of the 507th, including four who were wounded. Some members of the 507th had already been killed. Others were captured, including Private First Class Jessica D. Lynch, whose story would soon attract international attention.⁴⁸

Major Peeples's company's rescue of the 507th had burned up time and, more importantly, fuel. He therefore had to take his tanks back to the rear of the column to be refueled. The pump on the refueler was broken, so each tank had to be "gravity-fed," a process that took about 15 minutes per vehicle. For the rest of the march into Nasiriyah, then, the RCT-2 column would not be led by Team Tank, as Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski and his staff had planned, although a platoon of partially refueled tanks later did return to the head of the column.⁴⁹

At some point in the midst of these events, Brigadier General Natonski arrived near the head of the regimental combat team's column in a helicopter. Colonel Bailey had also returned from the position of the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, near the Highway 1 bridge to the west. Natonski attempted to enhance his situational awareness and was concerned about the apparent delay. He too encountered Captain King of the lost convoy and was dismayed and astounded at his story. The fate of the 507th confirmed to him the need to seize the vital bridges leading into and out of Nasiriyah as quickly as possible, and Colonel Bailey agreed. Since the Iraqis now knew that American forces were in the area, they might try to destroy those bridges. There were also indications that more soldiers of the



Photo by Eric Feferberg, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples
As Marines of Task Force Tarawa advance into combat in Nasiriyah on 23 March 2003, a sign “welcomes” them to the city.

507th were still stranded in the city. Natonski pulled Grabowski aside and said, “Rickey, you have to do whatever you can to find those missing soldiers. They would do it for us, and we need to do it for them.” As Natonski was leaving, Bailey looked directly at Grabowski and asked if he needed anything. Grabowski replied firmly, “Sir, we will get the bridges.”⁵⁰

Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski’s battalion resumed the march north around 0800 with a renewed sense of urgency. With Team Tank in the rear being refueled, and with significant resistance expected ahead, it traveled two companies abreast. On the right was Team Mech (Company B, track-mounted), minus the tank platoon, which was also refueling. On the left were the three track-mounted platoons of Company C. Company A and the rest of the regimental combat team followed behind as before.⁵¹

About three kilometers south of the city, the battalion approached a bridge that spanned a railway underpass. To cross it, the battalion redeployed into column formation, with Team Mech in the lead, followed by Company C. At that point, Staff Sergeant Troy Schielein, leader of Combined Anti-Armor Team 1, reported seven to nine Soviet-style enemy tanks in the underpass to his front, along with 40 to 50 dismounted infantry. Some of the tanks had no engines and were effectively only “stationary pillboxes.”⁵² Others were mobile and attempting to use the bridge itself for cover. Walking among his vehicles, Staff Sergeant Schielein identified targets and directed the fire of his TOW and Javelin missiles. He later credited Corporal Joshua C. McCall with destroying five tanks and Sergeant Edward Palacios Jr. with destroying three. Many of the enemy tanks, because they were so low in the underpass, could not elevate their tubes enough to engage the Marines at the bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski had already sent his executive officer, Major Jeffrey D. Tuggle, to the

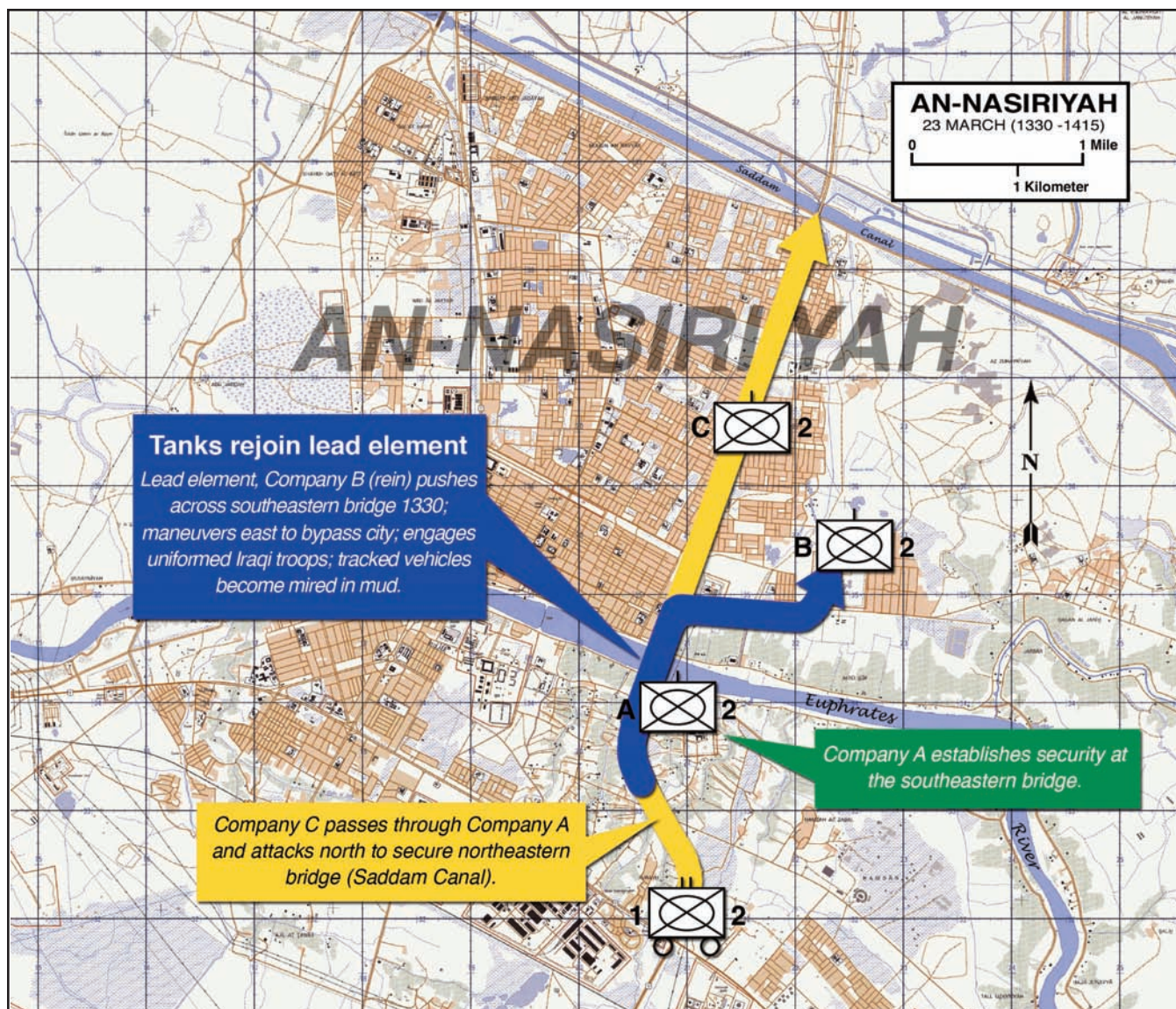
refueling point to find out what was taking so long to refuel the tanks. Shortly after Tuggle’s arrival, Major Peeples sent one platoon, partially refueled, back into the fight.⁵³

The refueled tank platoon belonging to Team Mech roared back to the head of the column as Team Mech led the battalion into the city, followed by Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski’s command group, Company A, and then Company C. Grabowski intended for Team Mech to cross the southeastern bridge, then turn right and flank out to the east. Continuing straight down the road after crossing the bridge would have taken them right into Ambush Alley. In case of heavy resistance, Grabowski’s plan was for Company B or Team Mech to cross the bridge, turn right, and head north again, traveling along a route parallel to and to the east of Ambush Alley. Company A, close behind, would secure the bridge by setting up a perimeter and checking for explosives. Company C would follow in trace of Team Mech. Team Mech would then establish a base of fire southeast of the Saddam Canal bridge, which would support Company C as it secured that crossing.⁵⁴

It was a solid plan, but it was at this point that things began to go wrong for 1st Battalion, 2d Marines. So far the battalion had overcome every obstacle. The rescue of the 507th had caused delays, as had the shortage of fuel. Small-arms fire, indirect fire, and enemy tanks had also temporarily slowed the advance, but the Marines had surmounted each of these situations without sustaining further American casualties. Friction and the fog of war, however, were about to take their toll. As Team Mech crossed the bridge at about 1230, it began to take small-arms fire and poorly directed rocket fire. The lead elements—tanks that were buttoned up and therefore had poor visibility—missed the first turn to the right. They managed to make the second turn and to travel a few hundred meters east. The entire company then began to



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples
Marines move into Nasiriyah on a FMC AAV-7A1 Amphibious Assault Vehicle on 23 March 2003. This picture was taken south of the southeastern bridge.



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turn northward as planned and fan out into a relatively open field. The terrain looked passable, but the initial appearance was deceptive. Just below a 6- to 12-inch crust was a thick, gooey layer of silt and sewage several feet deep. The first tank suddenly sank to its axles. Soon other tracks and Humvees got stuck as well. Team Mech continued to take fire as its Marines tried to extricate the stuck vehicles and make their way to the Saddam Canal bridge.⁵⁵

To make the situation worse, Team Mech and Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski, who was with the company, lost virtually all communications. There was too much chatter on the radio nets, and the buildings in the city, as well as high-tension power lines, disrupted line-of-sight communications. The artillery liaison officer had no communications with the artillery; the battalion air officer, Captain A. J. Greene, had almost no communications; and Grabowski was desperately trying to reach Captain Daniel

J. Wittnam, the commander of Company C.⁵⁶ He wanted to tell him not to follow him as previously planned. Advancing across the eastern salt flats to bypass Ambush Alley was clearly not going to work and would only slow the battalion's momentum. Eventually, Team Mech's forward air controller, Captain Dennis A. Santare, was able to get air support from AH-1 Cobra helicopters to suppress the fire being directed at the Marines from flat rooftops around them. The enemy fighters were using "shoot and scoot" tactics—briefly exposing themselves on a rooftop, in a window, or a doorway long enough to fire, then darting

⁵⁵ Some participants later noted that elements of 1st Battalion, 2d Marine, had degraded communications ability well before reaching the Euphrates bridge, in some cases even before crossing the line of departure. See comments by Hawkins and Barry in LtCol Donald S. Hawkins, Maj Craig H. Streeter, Maj Matthew R. Shenberger, and GySgt Kevin Barry intvw with Fred Allison, 13Oct06 (Marine Corps Historical Center, Quantico, VA), transcript, p. 12.

for cover or to another building. Later, however, the presence of the Cobras overhead made that tactic less and less possible. Movement exposed them to the helicopters' observation and fire. The Cobras helped Marines on the ground identify targets and locate Iraqi fighters that they could not see themselves.⁵⁶

Shortly after Company B, or Team Mech, crossed the Euphrates bridge, Company A followed. This company, commanded by Captain Michael A. Brooks, also received light incoming fire, which soon increased a great deal. Brooks's Marines returned fire and set up a perimeter around the northern side of the bridge.

As Captain Wittnam, commander of Company C, crossed the southeastern bridge, he could see that Company A was taking fire but that it had established a perimeter around the bridgehead. However, there was no sign of Company B (Team Mech) or the battalion commander. Wittnam could neither see them nor hear Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski trying to reach him on the radio. Wittnam concluded that Company B must have proceeded straight down the road to the final objective—the Saddam Canal bridge. He decided to do the same, to dash down Ambush Alley for the bridge, which, it turned out, was exactly what Grabowski now wanted him to do. Wittnam's decision was logical based on the commander's intent he had received, as his main objective was to secure the Saddam Canal bridge.⁵⁷

Though Grabowski still had not managed to get through to Wittnam's Company C, he was again able to contact his executive officer, Major Tuggle. He told him to go to the refueling site and personally order the remaining tanks to the city right away. Major Peeples had already sent one platoon north to help Team Mech, and his last five tanks were still being refueled. Upon receiving Grabowski's order through Major Tuggle, Peeples discontinued refueling with his last tanks only partially filled and began moving north. One of his five tanks broke down almost immediately. Just after crossing the railroad bridge south of the city, his four remaining tanks encountered six Iraqi tanks and destroyed three. Peeples's tanks continued on toward the Euphrates bridge. Seeing that the Company A Marines were dismounted and receiving and returning fire, Peeples halted his tank, dismounted, and asked Captain Brooks what he needed. The tank company commander deployed his tanks according to Brooks's requests, and together the tank-infantry team began to designate and destroy enemy targets. Brooks's Marines continued to take heavy fire, but not a single man in Company A was seriously wounded. With the presence and fire of the tanks, the Iraqi fire

immediately began to slacken. Cobra helicopters provided much-needed support as well.⁵⁸

The Ordeal of Charlie Company—The Eastern Saddam Canal Bridge

Company C continued past Company A at the bridge and raced through Ambush Alley taking heavy small-arms and rocket fire from the front, left, and right. Iraqi fighters in civilian clothes emerged out of seemingly every window and doorway to fire rifles and rockets. Some ran into the street with rockets to fire at point-blank range. Some of the rockets glanced off the sides of the tracks, while others hit and did not detonate, as if they had not been properly armed before being fired.⁵⁹

The response of Company C's Marines and the amphibious assault vehicle drivers with them corresponded exactly to their training. First, the Marines' return fire was accurate and heavy. Marines in every track in Company C responded with rifles, .50-caliber machine guns, and 40mm grenades from MK19 grenade launchers, sometimes firing at the cyclic rate. They inflicted heavy casualties. The Iraqi soldiers who had waylaid the 507th Maintenance Company only hours before found the response of a mechanized

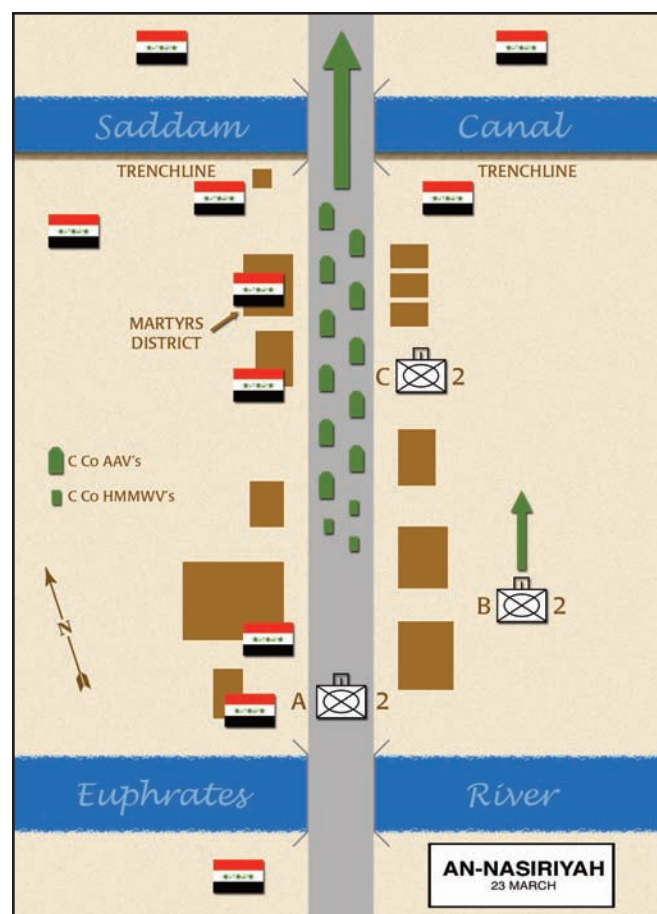


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

Battle of An-Nasiriyah



Photo by LCpl Bryan J. Nealy

An aerial view of Nasiriyah, looking southwest from the north side of the Saddam Canal, crossed by 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, on 23 March 2003. The buildings in the center of the photo, to the right (west) of the southern end of the bridge, made up the "Martyr's District," a neighborhood occupied by large numbers of fedayeen fighters.

Marine rifle company was far different. The soldiers of the 507th had fought back bravely but had only been able to respond with sporadic fire from a few rifles and one M249 squad automatic weapon. The Marines' response was much heavier, better directed, and more deadly. Another significant factor was that the company's vehicles neither bunched up nor got too separated from one another, maintaining an interval of 50 to 250 meters between each track or Humvee. The convoy never lost its momentum and proceeded through the kill zone as rapidly as possible.

Roughly halfway through the gauntlet between the two bridges, one of the tracks of 3d Platoon was hit by a rocket, and five Marines were wounded, some critically. Commanding the vehicle was First Lieutenant Michael S. Seely, a former sergeant who had earned the Purple Heart and Bronze Star in the first Gulf War. Seely saw that he had wounded aboard and that part of the right side of the track had caught fire. He knew, however, that it would be fatal either to dismount or stop. Once he realized that the track still had some power left, he commanded the driver, Sergeant Michael E. Bitz, to "push, push, push" and "get us the hell out of here." The damaged track sped toward the Saddam Canal bridge without taking further casualties.⁶⁰

Every vehicle of Company C reached the Saddam Canal bridge and continued north for several hundred meters. Captain Wittnam and his platoon commanders began parking their tracks in a "herringbone" formation and dismounting to form a perimeter that was elongated from north to south, with the lead track and the last one separated by at least a kilometer. The Marines of Company C had established a bridgehead without the planned supporting fire from Company B, but their situation was extremely perilous. Wittnam did have all the organic firepower (that which was inherent to the unit) belonging to a Marine rifle company, as well as the .50-caliber machine guns and MK19 grenade launchers on his tracks. Other than that, though, Company C was on its own and had ventured into the teeth of the defenses of the 23d Brigade of the 11th Infantry Division.

Captain Wittnam's Marines were taking machine-gun, rocket, recoilless rifle, and mortar fire from the north, east, and west. Heavy fire was also coming from the Martyr's District, a military complex to the company's southwest that was on the southern bank of the Saddam Canal. Wittnam had no forward air controller to call in air support. He had a 60mm mortar platoon, but he could not

get radio contact with either the battalion's 81mm mortars or with the artillery of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines. Nor could he establish effective communications with his battalion commander to advise him of his situation. Sometime around 1300, the two had established contact long enough for Wittnam to communicate that he had secured the Saddam Canal bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski was elated. Immediately after this, however, Grabowski and Wittnam lost communications again. Worse, few besides Grabowski had heard Wittnam's report, and those who did were all colocated with him and had little or no radio contact with Company B. That company's commander, Captain Timothy A. Newland, and his forward air controller, Captain Santare, continued to believe that Company B was still the forward element of the battalion, thinking that no Marines were north of the Saddam Canal.⁶¹

Company C returned fire with all its organic weapons. Occasionally the company commander; the artillery forward observer, Second Lieutenant Frederick E. Pokorney Jr.; and the mortar platoon commander, First Lieutenant James "Ben" Reid, got atop the elevated roadway in the center of the position to gain situational awareness and identify targets. Reid's mortarmen were able to deliver effective fire for awhile. Pokorney at long last established contact with the artillery, the 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, and called in a fire mission. Shortly afterward, however, Iraqi mortar rounds began crashing into Company C's position, killing Pokorney and killing and wounding several mortarmen. Marines on the left side of the road began to advance westward toward the enemy, employing fire and maneuver while using small drainage canals and ditches for cover. They too soon began to receive accurate mortar fire, although much of the blast from the rounds was absorbed by the soggy ground around them. One track was loaded with casualties and sent back south (although no one seems to know who gave this order). It dashed back down Ambush Alley, through Company A's position at the southeastern bridge, safely delivered the wounded to the battalion aid station, and then returned to Company A's position. The loading of wounded Marines into tracked vehicles continued, as that was the only way to evacuate them. The volume of fire Company C was receiving made evacuation by helicopters impossible.⁶²

While Company C was desperately holding on north of the Canal, Company B Marines continued working their way north through streets and alleys to the eastern Saddam Canal bridge. Advancing northward on foot and in soft-skinned vehicles, they were in the midst of the urban fight they had hoped to avoid. Behind them, the AAV-7 and tank personnel were doing all they could to

extract their mired vehicles, occasionally getting others stuck in the process.

When Task Force Tarawa went into combat, each of its rifle battalions had one air officer attached to the battalion headquarters and two forward air controllers, so that two of the three rifle companies had their own forward air controller. When 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, went into battle, Company A's forward air controller was Captain James Jones. Company B was assigned Captain Santare (call sign "Mouth"). Company C, as the last company in the column, did not have its own forward air controller. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski's battalion air officer was Captain Greene.

As the battalion advanced up the highway toward Nasiriyah throughout the morning, Captain Santare had been busy coordinating Cobra attacks against targets identified by Company B. These Cobra strikes continued as Company B crossed the Euphrates bridge, turned east, and began moving north toward the Saddam Canal, with Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski's command vehicle several blocks away. Poor communications affected Santare and Greene as much as anyone in Nasiriyah. For most of this time, Greene had virtually no working radios and was effectively out of the battle. He therefore passed control to the two company forward air controllers, allowing them to direct their own air attacks at the company level. Santare, meanwhile, had good communications with the AH-1 Cobra helicopters, but his communications with ground components outside of Company B were tenuous at best.⁶³

Captain Santare and the Company B commander, Captain Newland, still believed that Company B was the most forward element of the regimental combat team. They continued in this belief even after Wittnam was able to report to Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski that he had crossed the Saddam Canal bridge because, as indicated earlier, no one in Company B had heard that transmission. Neither had the air officer, Captain Greene, who was no longer located with Grabowski. What Newland, Santare, and Greene did know was that Company B was receiving a tremendous volume of fire from north of the Saddam Canal. In fact, Newland had already told Santare that as soon as he could get support from A-10 Thunderbolt aircraft, he wanted him to start running missions north of the Saddam Canal. For an instant, Santare and Greene managed to establish radio contact. Greene told Santare, "Mouth, I need you to get on guard and get any air support you can get!"⁶⁴ Santare understood that the situation was dire; the "guard" frequency was normally used only for flight emergencies.⁶⁵



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples

Marines shield an injured comrade while pinned down in a firefight in Nasiriyah on 23 March 2003. Numerous Task Force Tarawa Marines were wounded, but none killed, between 24 March and the end of the battle.

Santare got on his radio and announced, “On guard, on guard, this is Mouth in the vicinity of Nasiriyah. We have troops in contact and need immediate air support.”⁶⁶ Within seconds, fixed-wing aircraft began checking in with Santare. Santare waited for a Navy or Marine jet with an airborne forward air controller to answer, but none did. Instead, he began working with two A-10s from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, “Gyrate-73” and “Gyrate-74.” Circling high over the battlefield and communicating with Santare, the Air Force jets attempted to get a fix on his position in Nasiriyah east of Ambush Alley and identify targets.⁶⁷

The A-10s identified vehicular targets north of the Saddam Canal’s eastern bridge and passed the locations to Captain Santare. Santare in turn verified with Captain Newland that Company B was still the forward-most friendly unit. Santare’s problem now was that he could see neither the A-10s nor the targets that they were identifying to him. Both the pilots and Santare did see the smoke coming from a burning vehicle on the highway north of the Saddam Canal bridge and used that as a reference point. None of them knew that the vehicle was actually the destroyed track that had transported First Lieutenant Seely and his other Marines from Company C.⁶⁸

The preferred type of air control that Captain Santare would have liked to use was Type I close air support [CAS], in which the forward air controller can see both the attacking aircraft and the target. The next preferred method was Type II close air support, where the forward air controller either cannot see the aircraft or the target, or when the attacking aircraft cannot acquire the target prior to release or launch of the weapon. Santare’s situation was even more uncertain, and he ended up using Type III close air support, which is when the controller can observe neither the target nor the aircraft.

The battalion operations order then in effect prohibited the use of Type III CAS without the clearance of the battalion commander. With a good visual of either the aircrafts’ intended targets or of the A-10s themselves, Captain Santare authorized Gyrate-73 and Gyrate-74 to attack anything north of the Saddam Canal. Based on how poor communications had been, Santare believed that it would take a very long time for himself or Captain Newland to reach Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski—if he could be reached at all. Air support is a “use it or lose it” asset and cannot be kept on hold forever. Moreover, Company B was in the middle of an ambush and taking heavy fire. Based on the overall commander’s intent,



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples

Marines of Task Force Tarawa search the hulk of a destroyed AAV-7A1 "track" in Nasiriyah in late March 2003. This vehicle, attached to 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was destroyed while traversing "Ambush Alley."

therefore, Santare felt that the best thing to do would be to authorize the A-10 attacks. He later explained that "I felt that if I did not act, Marines would die."⁶⁹

Meanwhile, Company C was still under fire from the 23d Brigade's mortars, artillery, rockets, and small arms. On their own initiative, some small unit leaders began loading more wounded Marines onto tracks so they could be evacuated back down Ambush Alley to the southern bridge. Other Marines who had been methodically advancing by fire and movement to the west began returning to the highway in the vicinity of where some of the tracks were positioned.

It is unclear why Marines were returning to the highway, or who ordered this action. First Lieutenant Seely, Company C's 3d Platoon commander, remembered only that Marines on the AAVs on the highway began waving and shouting to him and his Marines to come to them. He asked what was going on, only to be told "We're loading up." Before he could make sense of the situation, the A-10s began their strafing runs on Company C. Second Lieutenant Scott M. Swantner, too, was unsure who gave these orders. He later surmised that it was

"multiple people giving multiple orders." The company executive officer, First Lieutenant Eric A. Meador, and 3d Platoon platoon sergeant Staff Sergeant Anthony J. Pompos thought that they would be headed north when they boarded the vehicles. The company first sergeant, First Sergeant Jose G. Henao, also did not know who ordered the AAVs to head south.⁷⁰

First Lieutenant Seely had just returned to the highway and was trying to discover why Marines were returning there when the first A-10 strafing run occurred.* At that moment, one Marine was struck in the chest and killed, and at least four other Marines were wounded. Seely had been strafed by A-10s in Desert Storm. He knew immediately what had happened; the sound of 30mm rounds hitting the deck followed immediately by that of the armament itself was unforgettable and unmistakable to him. He yelled to Second Lieutenant Swantner, the 1st Platoon Commander, to fire pyrotechnics. Within

* Apparently, earlier the A-10s had dropped several MK82 bombs. "U.S. Central Command Investigation of Suspected Friendly Fire Incident Near Nasiriyah, Iraq, 23 March 03," Capt Dennis A. Santare testimony, p. H-33; Tab A-H, p. 20.

seconds, Swantner popped two red star clusters, the signal to cease-fire. Seely yelled to nearby Marines for a radio, hoping for a chance to call off the attack, and also helped other Marines load the wounded onto the tracks. While Marines were struggling with this task, the A-10s made several more strafing runs.⁷¹

Soon a convoy of four Company C tracks loaded with dead and wounded Marines began speeding south. As the vehicles crossed back over the Saddam Canal bridge and progressed down Ambush Alley, they were hit again by rockets. The A-10s also attacked them with AGM-65 Maverick air-to-surface missiles. The A-10 pilots, seeing armored vehicles moving south, believed they were part of an enemy armored column and reported them to Captain Santare. Because intelligence reports had warned of an Iraqi armored column headed south, Santare authorized the aircraft to attack them.⁷²

At one point, Captain Santare, who was moving west with the rest of Company B toward the Saddam Canal bridge, thought he saw Humvees in front of him. He radioed the A-10s to abort the mission while he again attempted to verify with other officers that Company B

was the lead element of the regimental combat team. Informed by Captain Newland that was still the case, he cleared the A-10s for further runs.⁷³ Only two of the four tracks made it back to Company A's position at the southeastern bridge. In all, Company C had 18 Marines killed, between 14 to 19 wounded, 5 tracks destroyed, and 2 damaged so badly that they were abandoned. Given the fog of war, it is difficult to know which of these losses were directly attributable to friendly fire, enemy fire, or a combination of both.^{*74}

** There is some confusion over how many Marines from Company C and its attached elements were wounded, but not killed, on 23 March. The Final Report of the CentCom investigation says that 19 Marines from Company C were wounded. Elsewhere in the CentCom investigation, an "Executive Summary" of the findings gives the figure of 17. The battalion's narrative summary claims that a total of 15 Marines were wounded, including Marines attached to Company C from the AAV Company and LAAD section. Perhaps the most authoritative figure comes from Company C's own command chronology, which lists 14 Marines by name and the platoon or attachment to which each belonged.*

Company C Casualties on 23 March at Nasiriyah

A lengthy investigation by U.S. Central Command was unable to determine conclusively how much of the damage and loss of life was the result of Air Force A-10 fire and how much resulted from enemy rockets. (A few Marines attacked south of the canal thought they were hit by mortars, not rockets.) For instance, in the most catastrophic event, vehicle C208 was destroyed by a terrific explosion, killing all nine Marines riding in the back. Some of these Marines had already been wounded north of the canal. The others were riding on the track after volunteering to load wounded comrades on it while under fire themselves. Based on an analysis of the wreckage and the human remains, the investigators could only conclude that C208 had been struck both by enemy rockets and American aircraft.

The Investigating Board concluded that of the 18 Marines from Company C killed on 23 March, 8 were definitely killed by enemy fire. It further stated that of the remaining 10, forensic evidence and the mixture of intense fire received made it impossible to tell how many were killed by enemy fire and how many by friendly fire. This document stated that 17 Marines were wounded. Of those, 15 received wounds from a combination of friendly and enemy fire, and two from sources "which the Board cannot determine."^{*} This addendum in itself was a revision of an earlier set of conclusions, which had originally attributed more of the casualties to friendly fire.

Marines who were present on the ground would likely disagree with these findings. Their subsequent testimony and interviews indicate that several Marines were definitely wounded or killed at the precise instant that an A-10 strafing run or AGM-65 Maverick strike occurred on their position. At least eight Marines testified that they saw this occur.⁷⁵ As for the seven destroyed or abandoned tracks, the investigation was only able to determine that two of the vehicles were positively destroyed by friendly fire.⁷⁶

^{*} "U.S. Central Command Investigation of Suspected Friendly Fire Incident Near Nasiriyah, Iraq, 23 March 03," Memorandum for USCENCOM/CS, "Addendum to Friendly Fire Investigation Board," p. A-4. This addendum was in itself a revision of an earlier set of conclusions of the Board, which had originally attributed more of the casualties to friendly fire. This addendum contradicts statements in Tab A-H, Final Report, p. 11, such as "The first pass of the A-10 killed the Marine with which the 1stSgt had been conversing just minutes before, and after the A-10's second pass, all 3 Marines at the mortar position lay dead on the ground."

Once the survivors of the convoy arrived at Company A's position, the wounded were evacuated to the battalion rear. The unwounded survivors would eventually return to their company's position with Company A once Captain Brooks led the entire group north to the Saddam Canal bridge. Additionally, nearly a dozen other Marines who escaped the destroyed tracks had taken shelter in a building on the west side of Ambush Alley. They held out for hours until Major Peeples, and then Gunnery Sergeant Jason K. Doran and Lieutenant Letendre, led two forays into the city to retrieve them.⁷⁷

North of the bridge, Captain Wittnam was left with two lieutenants and roughly half of his company. First Lieutenant Seely eventually found a radio with a 10-foot whip antenna and managed to reach the battalion fire support coordinator on the battalion tactical net and inform him that Company C was being attacked by friendly aircraft. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski and his fire support coordinator could not reach Captain Santare but apparently managed to reach the headquarters of RCT-2. Santare received word somehow and passed the "abort" signal to the A-10 pilots. Within a few minutes of Seely's report, the attacks ceased.⁷⁸

Reflections on the A-10 Friendly Fire Incident

Everyone involved in the A-10 friendly fire incident and the investigation that followed attempted to make sense of what happened. Many tried to draw some "lessons learned." Marines on the ground initially were angry with the pilots for failing to recognize the distinctive outline of a U.S. Marine Corps AAV-7 assault amphibian vehicle. At one point, one of the pilots recognized white pickup trucks and "cab over" flatbed trucks, but he later failed to recognize other targets as Marine Corps AAV-7s. For others, the incident reinforced their distrust of any pilots who were not from the Marine Corps or Navy.

Although these sentiments were understandable, they may or may not be valid. The A-10s were receiving heavy antiaircraft fire and had to attack from a high altitude, making target recognition difficult during most of their time flying above the target area. Thus, they had to rely primarily on the forward air controller, who cleared them to attack any target north of the Saddam Canal and then cleared them to attack what was thought to be an enemy armored column south of the canal moving south. Another event that exacerbated the severity of the incident but did not cause it was the pilots' failure to recognize several flares launched by Company C's Marines to signal the command to "cease fire." Those flares, however, easily could have been mistaken for tracers.⁷⁹

There were many other contributing factors, including the need to depart from the battalion's original attack plan in the city and the urban terrain that precluded visibility of friendly units and impaired communications with them. Because of poor communications, when the forward air controller made several attempts to verify that his unit was the lead trace of friendly units, he had to rely on another officer located near him who had no more information than he did. It also would have been helpful if every company had had its own forward air controller; Company C did not. Additionally, instructions from higher headquarters precluded the use of American flags and orange air panels on vehicles.⁸⁰

Finally, there was no preplanned air support for the attack into Nasiriyah. The city itself was a restricted fire area prior to the attack, and no one wanted to risk harming civilians if the Iraqis were expected to retreat or capitulate quickly anyway. Task Force Tarawa was not the I MEF's focus of effort and did not have priority of fires. However, there were numerous targets north of the canal that could have been attacked earlier; instead, forward air controllers with 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, had to improvise and scramble throughout the day to provide air support.

The Central Command Friendly Fire Incident Investigation logically concluded that the cause of the incident was the forward air controller's violation of a standing order not to use Type III close air support without approval from higher headquarters. If he had contacted the battalion commander, he would have known that friendly forces were north of the Saddam Canal. Even if he failed to make contact with the battalion commander but still adhered to the standing order, the incident would not have occurred.⁸¹

Few believed that the incident reflected poorly on the character or professionalism of Captain Dennis A. Santare. The Friendly Fire Investigation Board at U.S. Central Command observed that Santare "performed admirably and with bravery" for days after the incident until recalled for official questioning. Moreover, based on Santare's "awareness of the battle space, he was acting in what he perceived to be in the best interest of saving lives of his fellow Marines." Still, it was "indisputable," the board concluded, that Santare's violation of a standing order was the direct cause of the tragic friendly fire incident.⁸²

One lesson from the incident is that ground forces must remain extremely cautious about using Type III close air support. Specifically, in a situation in which there are significant communications problems, they should not employ Type III close air support at all, regardless of commander's intent or perceived intent. The incident is also a reminder of the importance of target identification. This point, too, is related to the danger of using Type III close air support since part of the definition of Type III close air support gives "blanket" weapons release clearance to aircraft without positive target identification.

23 March—Securing the Eastern Bridges

Back at the southeastern bridge, Captain Brooks of Company A, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was wondering when he would be released to go help Company C at the Saddam Canal bridge. Brooks was growing frustrated, knowing that he was needed at the Saddam Canal bridge and believing, based on prior conversations and informal planning back at Camp Shoup, that a physical relief in place was supposed to occur. According to prior planning and discussions, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was supposed to conduct a relief in place with Company A, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, at the southeastern bridge. Although 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, did reach the southeastern bridge on the afternoon of the 23d, an actual relief in place never occurred.

What happened instead is that Company C's executive officer, First Lieutenant Eric Meador, finally reached Company A's position after surviving the run down Ambush Alley and A-10 strikes and told Captain Brooks that Company A was needed north of the canal. Brooks knew that he was supposed to hold the southern bridge until relieved, but Major Peeples dashed up Ambush Alley with two of the four tanks to help Company C.⁸³

Apparently, elements of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, namely Company F, had actually reached the southern end of the bridge before Captain Brooks left the northern end to go to the Saddam Canal bridge. The official "Chronicle of Actions of Task Force Tarawa" records that 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, "relieved" 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, at the southern bridge at 1403.⁸⁴ However, Brooks, on the northern end of the bridge, was not aware of Company F's presence on the southern end. As late as 1530, Brooks was trying to contact his superiors and wondering where his relief was. Around 1530, he was able to establish contact with the battalion assistant operations officer, Captain Joel D. Hernley, and asked impatiently when he was going to be relieved so that he could move north to support Company C. Hernley responded that he had just communicated with 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and that they were at the bridge. Brooks looked at the bridge span and saw that it was empty. He asked Hernley to find out if and when 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was actually coming. Without a clear answer, Brooks decided that it was time to leave the Euphrates bridge and make a dash up Ambush Alley to assist Company C on the north side of the canal. Informing Hernley of his decision, he ordered all of his Marines, the 81mm mortars that had arrived to support him, the squad from the Combined Anti-Armor Team platoon, and the two remaining tanks to mount up. According to Brooks, his orders to the

Marines with him were to "suppress any enemy that you see, make best possible speed, and don't stop until you push to Charlie Company's position." He recalled that "I looked at my GPS (Global Positioning System) afterwards, and it recorded that we were going about 43 miles an hour in the AAVs, which is pretty darn fast. . . . We took fire the whole way through, but we made it through without losing a . . . single man."⁸⁵ Sometime around 1600, Brooks crossed the Saddam Canal bridge and into Company C's position.⁸⁶

The Relief at the Euphrates Bridge

The operations officer of RCT-2, Major Andrew R. Kennedy, said that he was unaware at the time that a physical link-up between 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, had not taken place at the southeastern bridge. He believed that events transpired the way they did "because we were branching from the Frag[mentary] O[rder] at that point and so it wasn't immediately clear that it would be executed precisely the way it had been planned."⁸⁷ Originally, once 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, relieved 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, at the southeastern bridge, the sector for 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was to become Ambush Alley. Because of the unexpected heavy resistance in the city, however, it did not make sense to have a dismounted force (2d Battalion, 8th Marines) trying to occupy Ambush Alley physically when it could protect the route just as well with artillery and direct fires from its position south of the bridge. In fact, Lieutenant Colonel Royal P. Mortenson of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, believed that by dominating the northern bank of the Euphrates by fire from the southern side, he had effectively relieved Company A and freed it to take its combat power to the north.⁸⁸ Additionally, the expanse of the southern bridge itself, especially the apex, was the most dangerous part of the sector of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and it made sense not to put Marines on it. Thus, the course of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was probably the correct one, but Captain Brooks of Company A was not aware of it and spent some time wondering when his relief would arrive. Brooks also made the right call in going north to help Company C.*

* Company F's command chronology (section 2, p. II-2) states that some of its Marines crossed over the southern bridge; seeing no one from 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, they returned to the southern side. This must have occurred some time after Company F reached the southern side and after Captain Brooks departed the northern side. It is difficult to explain how the Marines of Company F could have crossed the bridge and not have noticed A Company's AAVs and the tanks with them.



Photo by LCpl Bryan J. Nealy

An aerial view of the southeastern bridge over the Euphrates River in Nasiriyah, looking from northeast to southwest. Note the relatively thick vegetation along a portion of the southern side of the river. The 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, and elements of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, operated in this sector of the city.

Once Company A crossed the Saddam Canal bridge, Iraqi resistance north of the canal “just evaporated,” in Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski’s words.⁸⁹ It became clear later that the arrival of Company A north of the canal (Company B would also arrive shortly) convinced Iraqi forces there that the Marines were not going to quit or withdraw. The fight for the Saddam Canal bridge was over for the day.⁹⁰

While 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, had been slugging it out in Nasiriyah and north of the Euphrates, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, the next battalion in the regiment’s column, had been advancing toward the southeastern bridge, clearing resistance that had been bypassed by 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, as it drove north. Earlier, Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski had been able to reach the RCT-2 commander, Colonel Ronald Bailey, and request that 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, immediately relieve his own Company A at the southeastern bridge. Grabowski explained that he was taking casualties at the Saddam Canal bridge and needed to reinforce Company C there. Bailey passed the word to Lieutenant Colonel Royal Mortenson, commander of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines. However, it took a few hours for Mortenson’s Marines to get there since they were taking fire and trying to clear buildings and pockets of resistance.⁹¹

Mounted in seven-ton trucks, elements of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, proceeded to dismount points south of the southeastern bridge—“as close as possible,” Mortenson recalled, “because there was a certain sense of urgency” to relieve Company A so that they could move north.⁹² Company F reached the southern bridge sometime around 1400.⁹³ Shortly afterward, Company G arrived on its right flank, and Company E would soon come up on its left. Meanwhile, the battalion had been reinforced by a company of LAV-25s (light armored vehicles) from Lieutenant Colonel Eddie S. Ray’s 2d LAR Battalion. The 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was receiving moderate, inaccurate small-arms, sniper, and mortar fire at this point. Its Marines began to dominate the northern side of the bridge with its own fire, and some of them were temporarily placed on the apex of the bridge, but, as explained above, did not link up with Company A on the north side of the bridge.⁹⁴

The artillerymen of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, had had a busy day as well. Initially they were to be emplaced and ready to fire by 0700, and they had two batteries firing by about that time. The battalion “leapfrogged” its batteries forward during the day to continue to provide support for 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and 2d Battalion, 8th Marines. At one point, Battery B received mortar fire

and conducted an emergency displacement. The battalion found one technique in particular that enhanced the timeliness and effectiveness of its fires. Throughout the day, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Starnes, monitored the tactical nets of 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and RCT-2 in an attempt to enhance his own situational awareness. This helped the battalion anticipate the approximate locations of targets and the kinds of missions that the infantry would need even before they called for them. By the end of 23 March, 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, along with the addition of Battery I, 3d Battalion, 10th Marines, on loan from 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, had fired numerous immediate suppression missions with rocket-assisted projectiles, fire for effect missions with M483A1 DPICM projectiles, and numerous counterbattery missions. The battalion's fires destroyed at least five Iraqi tanks and one artillery battery and silenced numerous enemy artillery and mortar positions with its counterbattery fires. Brigadier General Richard Natonski noted in his personal journal that night that the artillery had provided "superb counterbattery support."⁹⁵ By the end of the day, however, the battalion found itself running low on conventional M107 high-explosive projectiles, a problem that would plague the artillery throughout the battle of Nasiriyah. The shortage of high-explosive ammunition was largely due to the reluctance to use the more deadly DPICM projectiles in an urban environment, which would have caused more civilian casualties.⁹⁶

The fight for Nasiriyah on 23 March had turned out to be far tougher than anyone in Task Force Tarawa, or indeed the Marine Expeditionary Force, had expected. Inadequate intelligence had definitely played a role in the early part of the fight. Nearly everyone had expected resistance to be light. According to intelligence provided to Brigadier General Natonski from I MEF, the Army had "defeated" the *11th Infantry Division* in the vicinity of Nasiriyah, and intelligence sources had predicted that Iraqi forces remaining in the city would quickly surrender or withdraw. The on-order mission to secure the eastern bridges was therefore envisioned to occur against little or no resistance.⁹⁷ However, the *11th Infantry Division* was far from defeated, and other units, including elements of the *51st Mechanized Infantry Division*, *Fedayeen*, and *Ba'ath militia*, were also present and ready to fight.⁹⁸ It later turned out that, far from being ready to withdraw, the Iraqis had selected Nasiriyah as one of the places where they would make a determined fight. As Natonski noted several months later, "I don't think we read the Iraqis right."⁹⁹

It later became apparent that the engagement with the 507th Maintenance Company in the early morning hours had emboldened the Iraqis and made them think they could defeat the Americans. This information came out in a tactical discussion between Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski and the captured executive officer of the *23d Brigade*. The Iraqi officer confided to Grabowski that, as a result of the encounter with the 507th, the *Fedayeen* were encouraged to resist harder, and even some tribal elders decided they "might as well be on the winning team."¹⁰⁰ The regular Iraqi Army soldiers also fought with greater confidence. Later, when a second Marine rifle company reinforced with tanks crossed the Saddam Canal bridge, the Iraqi related, the *23d Brigade* was convinced that it could not stop the Marines in that sector of the battlefield.¹⁰¹

Other factors had contributed to friction and the fog of war and ultimately resulted in Marine casualties. Unexpectedly impassable terrain on the eastern outskirts of the city; poor communications due to high-tension power lines and excessive radio traffic on tactical nets; and nearly unavoidable difficulties in refueling the tanks had all created great difficulty for the task force. By the end of the day, Brigadier General Natonski was unsure how many casualties he had suffered. Due to double-reporting, he was told that there may have been as many as 50 dead Marines.¹⁰² Actually, 18 Marines had been killed.

What he did know was that his Marines had been in "a tough fight."¹⁰³ He also knew that the close air support, artillery support, and unexpected help from 2d LAR Battalion had literally been lifesavers. The presence of the tanks had also been critical. His battalion commanders were pleased with the performance of their company commanders and lieutenants, as well as with their troops. Small unit leaders from the company to the fire team level had made difficult decisions under extreme pressure and had held their units together. There had been plenty of heroism, including Marines risking or even giving their lives to rescue their wounded comrades, with others exposing themselves to fire in order to locate targets and lead their subordinates, and two forays into Ambush Alley to recover Company C Marines stranded in the city after the A-10 strikes south of the canal. "We had the two bridges in our possession," Natonski recalled. "We had accomplished our mission and in the process rescued [a number of] soldiers."¹⁰⁴

* Natonski believed at one point that Task Force Tarawa had rescued 16 soldiers. However, it was later confirmed that the Marines had rescued 10, as Natonski's own subsequent comments indicate.

Army-Marine Relations

While the ambush of the 507th Maintenance Company and capture of the American soldiers attracted international attention, a less-noticed result of the affair was the appreciation by Army personnel for the Marines who unhesitatingly advanced to rescue the stranded soldiers of the 507th. After the Army concluded an official investigation of the affair, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General Eric K. Shinseki, wrote a personal thank-you to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Michael W. Hagee:

United States Army
Chief of Staff
June 10, 2003

General Michael W. Hagee
Commandant, United States Marine Corps
2 Navy Annex
Washington, DC 20380-1775

Dear Mike,

I just received a briefing from my staff concerning the 23 March attack on elements of the 507th Maintenance Company and 3d Forward Support Battalion (FSB), by Iraqi forces at An Nasiriyah. Prominent among the findings was the immediate and unhesitating response of the Marines of Task Force Tarawa to the 507th's call for assistance.

As you may know, thirty-three Soldiers from the 507th and 3d FSB found themselves unwittingly in An Nasiriyah and under attack. Our Soldiers fought through a series of ambushes as they attempted to get out of the city. The Commander of the 507th and five soldiers met forward elements of Task Force Tarawa just south of the city. The Marines responded immediately, without hesitation, and in fact rescued ten Soldiers.

Please extend my deepest appreciation to the Marines who answered that call for help from Soldiers in difficulty—it was noble in the immediacy of response. I know that Marines died in battle that day in An Nasiriyah, joining those Soldiers who had shed blood there just hours before. May God bless each one of them and their families.

With warmest regards, and sincere gratitude,

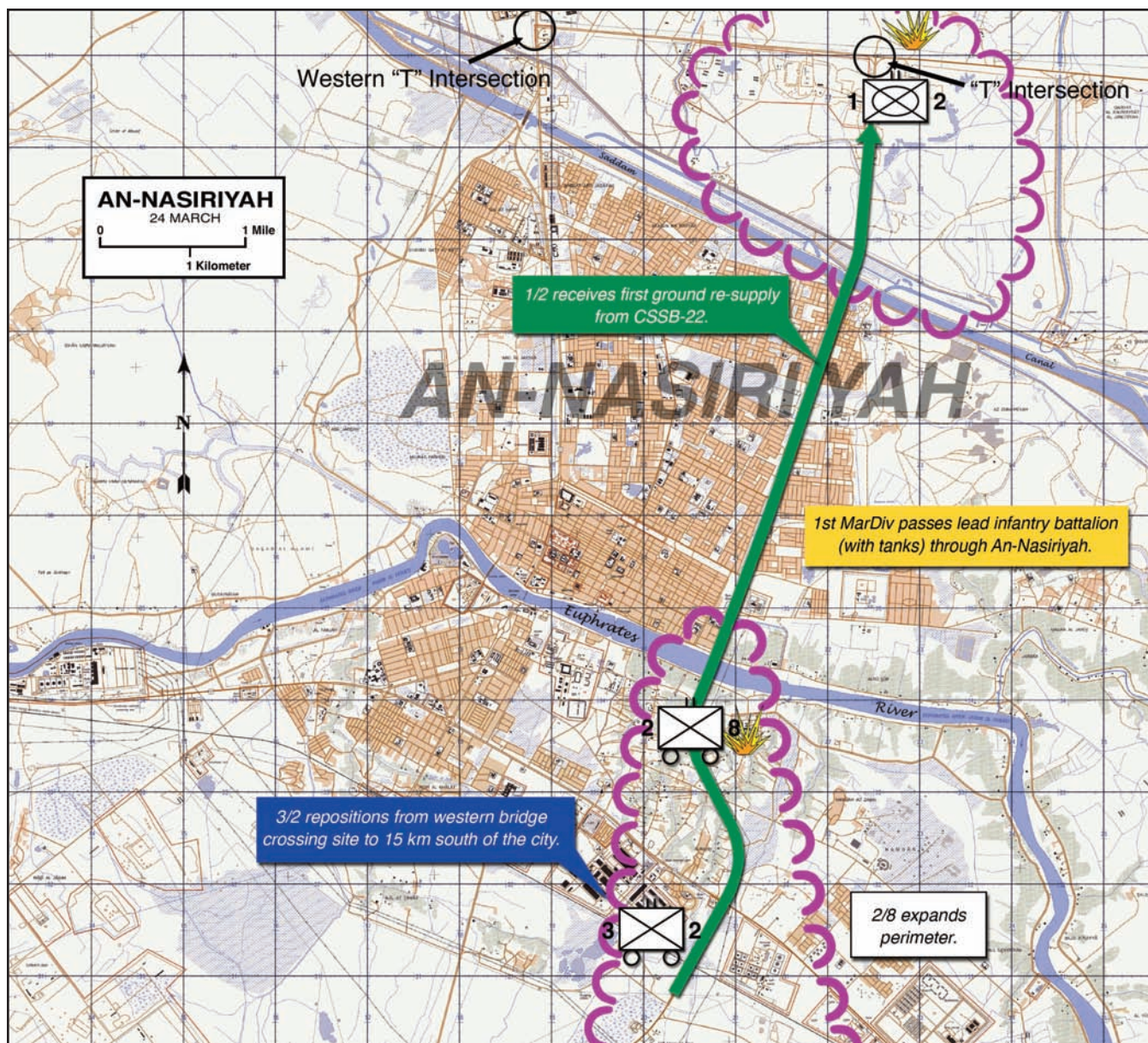
Eric K. Shinseki
General, United States Army¹⁰⁵

There were also some lessons learned. The most painful of them involved close air support. Efforts to provide much-needed close air support to the Marines of Company C north of the Saddam Canal had resulted in the deaths of several Marines due to poor communications, inadequate situational awareness, and the lack of direct observation of targets. The Marines also learned what kind of fighting to expect from their enemy. It appeared that the most significant source of enemy resistance might not be the uniformed Iraqi Army fighting with conventional tactics, but soldiers who changed into civilian clothes and paramilitaries who took advantage of American rules of engagement, American respect for the Geneva Convention, and American reluctance to harm civilians. They pushed women and children into the street to confuse the Marines, or even used them as shields. Often Iraqi fighters waved white flags and then fired on the Marines a moment later. These tactics created difficulty for the Marines, but after that first day, they now knew what to expect. They would still

attempt to follow the rules of engagement, but they would no longer be taken by surprise.¹⁰⁶

24 March—Expanding the Perimeter

During the night of 23-24 March, planning was directed toward three main goals: resupply 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, north of the Saddam Canal; use 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, to expand the bridgehead at the southeastern bridge, with the aim to eventually secure the eastern northbound approach to the river; and develop fire plans for indirect fires to suppress remaining resistance along Ambush Alley. As Major Andrew R. Kennedy said, planners and commanders considered this approach preferable to going “house to house, kicking down doors and throwing hand grenades.”¹⁰⁷ It did not seem to make sense to send either Lieutenant Colonel Mortenson's or Lieutenant Colonel Brent Dunahoe's Marines dismounted into the heart of the city to engage in a house-to-house fight.



NIMA CADRG 1:15K TLM/1994

In the early morning hours north of the Saddam Canal, Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski placed Major Peeples's tank company along the canal facing south toward the city. Grabowski's 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, fought off an enemy counterattack with close air support and artillery. The rifle companies, along with the previously attached elements of 2d LAR Battalion and four tanks, moved north to the "T" intersection north of the eastern Saddam Canal bridge in order to further secure the route north. The battalion consolidated around the intersection and captured the Iraqi *23d Brigade* headquarters. Then, around 1200, Company A attacked west to capture the "western T" intersection just north of the northwestern bridge over the Saddam Canal. After a brief firefight, the company secured the intersection and later established

control over the northwestern bridge itself. The elements of the LAR Battalion and four tanks supported Company A in its attack.

The Marines at the western "T" had to react quickly against Iraqi vehicles—often distinctive orange-and-white taxi cabs—that were used to transport Iraqi fighters or to probe the Marines' positions. Despite warning markers that were set up, some of these vehicles recklessly rushed the Marines' positions and were destroyed. Many of the Iraqis killed were wearing civilian clothes. Most of them were found with weapons or identification cards that showed them to be combatants, but occasionally women and children were found who had been traveling with the men. Captain Brooks had his Marines erect barriers so that they could more often stop the vehicles

without shooting, though some of the Marines were upset by thoughts of the civilians they had unavoidably killed. Meanwhile, Marines throughout the battalion received sporadic to moderate small-arms, mortar, and artillery fire during most of the day from all directions. The fire came from a mixture of *Fedayeen* militia and uniformed Iraqi soldiers, mortars, and artillery. One measure of the intensity of the fighting for 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was the number of times they requested organic indirect fire support. A squad leader in the battalion's 81mm mortar platoon recorded that his squad alone fired 412 rounds during the day in response to calls for fire from the rifle companies, tanks, and LAV-25s.¹⁰⁸

Probably the company that had the most difficult time over these next few days was Company C. The company was shorthanded due to the loss of 7 tracks, 18 dead, and 14 wounded on 23 March. In addition to the psychological impact of these losses, many Marines had had their personal gear lost or destroyed due to the destruction of the tracks. Some were worried about facing a possible chemical attack when they no longer had protective masks. Still, the company held together and continued to perform well, and Marines shared their gear and equipment with their comrades.¹⁰⁹



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples
Marines guard Iraqi prisoners of war in Nasiriyah on 26 March 2003.

Not only was 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, able to expand and consolidate American presence north of the canal, the battalion also received vital logistical support. Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters brought supplies and evacuated friendly, civilian, and enemy casualties. The battalion's Marines processed 148 detainees and enemy prisoners. Most importantly, a convoy of soft-skinned vehicles, escorted by 2d LAR, brought vital supplies. To protect the convoy, 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, fired a series, "Code Red," along the length of Ambush Alley,

keeping artillery rounds impacting several hundred meters in front of the convoy. The idea was to have enemy fighters ducking for cover and recovering from the concussion just as the convoy sped by. The convoy arrived around 1500 without incident or casualties. By 1700, all of 2d LAR Battalion passed forward of Company A, the lead company of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, becoming the first Coalition battalion to traverse through the length of Nasiriyah and past the western "T" north of the city. By the end of the day, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, had suffered one man wounded.¹¹⁰

South of the Euphrates, the mission on 24 March was to expand the southern bridgehead and prepare for the forward passage of lines by RCT-1 of the 1st Marine Division. On the 24th, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, performed the bulk of the work in this regard. During the night, the Marines had shot at and killed numerous Iraqis approaching their position on foot or in vehicles. Some had attempted to come across a footbridge that ran parallel to and east of the main bridge over the Euphrates. Often the light armored vehicles attached to the battalion delivered deadly fire across the river. Iraqi soldiers and militiamen continually moved about on foot and in vehicles, apparently thinking they were concealed by darkness. However, the thermal sights on the light armored vehicles made the Iraqis as visible as if it were broad daylight. Again and again, accurate and deadly fire erupted from the darkness south of the river and poured into the Iraqis on the other side from hundreds of meters away.¹¹¹ The same was true of snipers attached to Companies E and F, who eliminated numerous targets during the night. One sniper killed two Iraqi combatants with a single .50-caliber round. The men were attempting to use a woman and a child as a shield as they walked along the north bank of the Euphrates and tried to point out American positions. The sniper bided his time until he got just the right shot and killed both men without injuring the woman or the child. During the battle of Nasiriyah, the Scout-Sniper Platoon of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, had at least 34 kills.¹¹²

During the morning hours, Iraqi probes of the Marine positions continued. Company F took 15 to 20 Iraqi soldiers into custody at the southeastern bridge. The Iraqis had approached from the north, and a few were wounded. Also that morning, an Iraqi man approached Company G from the southeast. Several hundred meters away in that direction, there was a group of buildings that made up a hospital complex called the Tykar Hospital. The Iraqi man told the Marines of Company G, and then Captain Timothy R. Dremann of Company F, that he was a doctor. He claimed that the buildings, on which



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples

Marines of Task Force Tarawa guard Iraqi prisoners of war in Nasiriyah on 26 March 2003. Many Iraqi men who fought the Marines in Nasiriyah did so in civilian clothes, including members of the regular Iraqi army.

Marines had seen sandbag emplacements on the roof, were indeed part of a hospital complex. He said the hospital was only being used to treat sick and wounded people and implored the Marines not to fire on it. Additionally, he stated that he supported the U.S. cause. Finally he informed the Marines that there were four wounded Americans in the hospital, whom the Marines suspected might be survivors from the Army's 507th Maintenance Company. Company G sent a squad-sized patrol toward the hospital. The closer the patrol got to the complex, the more it looked like a military facility rather than a medical one. The squad withdrew, with Company G commander Captain Brian A. Ross announcing that more than a squad would be needed to sweep and clear the complex. In fact, it turned out that the Iraqi "doctor" was an Iraqi army officer, and the hospital was functioning as an enemy operations base, storage facility, and fighting position.¹¹³

Around 1700, Companies F and G began moving east and southeast, respectively, to expand the battalion perimeter. Company G, on the right, had been reinforced by two elements of the combined anti-armor platoon and a human exploitation team and had been ordered to conduct a cordon-and-search operation on the hospital

complex. Before the Marines reached the complex, however, they began taking fire from some buildings on its southern flank. The fire was heavy and was the most significant resistance the battalion had faced up to that point. Company F was also receiving indirect fire and direct fire from the hospital to the southeast, and from north of the river.

The Marines responded aggressively with mortars, artillery, and organic weapons of every caliber. After 15 minutes of overwhelming fire, Company G sent its 3d Platoon to sweep the buildings from which the company had received fire. The platoon found one enemy body, one captured rifle, and several blood trails. Company F, meanwhile, sent its 2d Platoon into part of the hospital complex. As dark was approaching, however, Lieutenant Colonel Mortenson decided that his hold on the hospital was too tenuous to occupy overnight. There was not enough time to complete the cordon and search and to consolidate possession of the complex. He withdrew his Marines from the buildings, kept them under observation with scout-snipers, and sealed them off with indirect fire. Around nightfall, some 80 individuals emerged from the complex and surrendered to the Marines after having been told to do so by a U.S. Army psychological

operations team and interpreter.¹¹⁴ Among them were an Iraqi general and a major wearing civilian clothes. In all, the Marines of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, had suffered four wounded from indirect fire, all of them belonging to Company F.¹¹⁵

The Marines of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, had made progress in consolidating their hold south of the southeastern bridge and had seriously damaged enemy forces. On the other hand, it had become clear to Colonel Ronald Bailey and Brigadier General Richard Natonski that Task Force Tarawa needed more combat power around the eastern bridges. For the time being, that help had to come from its own 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, led by Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe. Late on the night of the 23d, Dunahoe received the order to reinforce 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, from the south, on the eastern side of Nasiriyah. At first, the RCT had given thought to sending 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, north of the city to reinforce 1st Battalion, 2d Marines. This aggressive plan would have strengthened the battalion that had suffered the most that day. However, it also would have placed two battalions at the outer limit of the task force's ability to provide fire support and logistical help.

Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe and his operations officer, Major Daniel Canfield, had already begun planning for this operation, but the more they thought about it, the more they felt it was unwise. Dunahoe visited Colonel Bailey while Canfield spoke with the RCT operations officer, Major Kennedy. Many officers felt it more prudent to establish a strong base in the south, ensuring that the regimental combat team's line of supply would not be cut off. It also seemed risky to send a truck-mounted battalion into the heart of the city only a day after a mechanized battalion supported by tanks had had a difficult time advancing through it. Moreover, 3d Battalion would be conducting a forward passage of lines with 2d Battalion and a linkup with 1st Battalion at night, increasing the likelihood of fratricide. Canfield thought that 3d Battalion would be much more useful in the southern part of the city, most of which had not been secured. The 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, seemed confident of its ability to hold and expand its positions north of the canal as long as it received supplies. By the time Dunahoe reached Bailey's headquarters, Bailey had already begun reconsidering the plan. Shortly after Canfield's meeting with Kennedy, Canfield received word that 3d Battalion would not execute the plan after all.¹¹⁶

Instead, Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe's 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, received new orders to occupy assault



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples
Marines prepare to assault a walled compound in Nasiriyah. Marines of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, secured scores of such structures in the southern sector of the city.

positions 9 to 15 kilometers south of the city. This movement began at 0500, and by first light, the companies occupied their assault positions. Their next tasks were to relieve Company E, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, south of the southeastern bridge, occupy the western side of the road, and clear westward. Over the course of the day, members of the battalion staff made a reconnaissance and spent time coordinating with the key staff of RCT-2. Meanwhile, the rest of the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, refueled and conducted pre-combat checks. The battalion did not receive the "execute" order until around 0100 on the 25th and began its attack later that day.¹¹⁷

Much had been accomplished on 24 March. By the end of the day, Lieutenant Colonel Ray's 2d LAR Battalion had made it through Ambush Alley and past Company A's position on Highway 7, becoming the first battalion-sized elements of 1st Marine Division to pass through Nasiriyah. Later, 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, fired a mission with long-range rocket-assisted projectiles in support of 2d LAR as it fought northwest of Company A. Late that night, or in the early morning hours of the 25th, the first infantry battalion of RCT-1 pushed through the city. Not a single Marine was wounded or killed between the two eastern bridges after the 23d. Task Force Tarawa was solidifying its grip on the main supply route running through Nasiriyah, and on the outskirts of the city itself. The forward passage of lines had occurred, and the first part of Task Force Tarawa's mission had been accomplished.¹¹⁸

25-26 March—Tightening the Grip

Earlier on 24 March, Task Force Tarawa had received instructions from higher headquarters that would guide its activities over the following days. Fragmentary Order 023-03 from Lieutenant General James Conway directed the task force to consolidate in the vicinity of Nasiriyah and “protect highways 1 and 7 routes in zone in order to support throughput of follow-on personnel and equipment.” Conway and his staff agreed with the thinking of Brigadier General Natonski and planners within the regimental combat team that the task force should not engage in house-to-house urban fighting, advising that “activity in the built-up area of [Nasiriyah] should be limited to only that area required to ensure the security of soft-skinned vehicle convoys moving along Highways 1 and 7.”¹¹⁹ These orders shaped the work of Task Force Tarawa on the 25th.

By 1500 on 25 March, the companies of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, began to occupy their positions astride Highway 7 oriented west and south. Company K established contact with Company E, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and anchored

its right flank along the southern bank of the Euphrates. Company L was on Company K’s left, oriented west, and Company I held the southernmost flank, anchored along Route 8. Thus, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, made up one half of a semicircle oriented south from the southern side of the southeastern bridge. The rifle companies of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, formed the eastern side of the semicircle. The terrain on the western side of the semicircle, in the sector of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, was decidedly different from anything its Marines had yet seen in Iraq. They found themselves in the midst of palm trees and thick vegetation, and the ground was muddy from a driving rain that had begun that afternoon. It felt more like being in a jungle than a desert.¹²⁰

While the rifle companies of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, were establishing their positions west and south of the southeastern bridge, a bizarre incident occurred in the battalion rear, about 10 kilometers to the south. Five buses arrived in the position of the advance logistics operations center and main command post. They were loaded with military-aged Iraqi males who claimed to have been with the *51st Mechanized Division* that had



Map illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

surrendered in Basra and were now on their way home. They were unarmed, but all had large sums of Iraqi money. Personnel from the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, detained more than 120 of these men and processed them as prisoners to ensure that they did not reenter the city and become part of the enemy resistance. Intelligence later determined that these men were intended to fall in on the many caches of weapons and ammunition that the Marines were finding throughout the city.¹²¹

About the time that the rifle companies of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, were establishing their positions south of the city, a terrific sandstorm blew into the Nasiriyah area. While 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, battled these conditions west of the highway leading into the eastern side of the city, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, did the same on the eastern side as it worked to expand its control eastward. The unit historian for Company G called 25 March “the day of the sandstorms.”¹²² Marines at the Task Force Tarawa and RCT-2 command posts struggled to keep their tents from collapsing and blowing away. Sand caked eyes, ears, and weaponry. At times, visibility was less than



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples
Marines battled dust storms, torrential rain, and thick mud in Nasiriyah. This Marine carries an M16A2 service rifle and wears recently issued knee pads.

five meters. Within a few hours, the sandstorm was reinforced by a torrential downpour that continued until after midnight. Soaked to the bone, the artillerymen of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, continued to man their howitzers while the infantrymen carried out their tasks and occupied fighting holes that filled with water. The Company E unit historian wrote that “many of the Marines slept in puddles of water and mud that night.”¹²³

While the elements attacked the Marines, the men of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, attacked the enemy to expand the battalion’s control of the southern party of the city. Company E, before the arrival 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, had cleared several buildings to its west, including a military compound. Company F moved east, clearing nine houses to its front. In one of them, the Marines found U.S. Army uniforms from the missing soldiers of the 507th. Acting on the intelligence that there may be American captives still in the hospital, Lieutenant Colonel Royal Mortenson ordered Company F to attack it. Supported by mortars from Company G’s mortar section, Company F seized the compound. Five Marines were wounded in the assault. Inside the complex, Company F found a tank, hundreds of assault weapons, thousands of rounds of ammunition, hundreds of chemical protective suits, and two American military flak jackets adjusted to fit women, one bearing the name “Lynch.” Two female soldiers, Private First Class Lori A. Piestewa and Private First Class Jessica D. Lynch, had been held at the compound. Piestewa died there, and Lynch, unknown to the Marines, had been moved by the Iraqis earlier in the battle to the Saddam Hospital in the western part of the city north of the Euphrates.¹²⁴

After Company F secured the hospital, Mortenson ordered it to return to the bridge. It sealed off the compound during the night with indirect fires and observation by the battalion’s Scout Sniper Team 2. The objective was not so much to occupy the hospital physically as it was to deny its use to the Iraqis in their attempt to disrupt traffic along the highway and southeastern bridge. During the night, the scout-snipers observed an enemy patrol approaching the hospital and called artillery fires down on them.¹²⁵

As 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, expanded their perimeter eastward, the Marines of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, transitioned as quickly as possible from occupying their assault positions to expanding westward. Their battlespace was bounded on the north by the Euphrates River, on the south by Highway 8, and stretched westward all the way to Highway 1. This area made up the southern and western section of the city, encompassing industrial



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peebles

Marines of Task Force Tarawa search buildings in Nasiriyah for enemy combatants, arms, munitions, and intelligence information.

districts, medium-density residential neighborhoods, and some plots of farmland. Again, the asymmetrical nature of the enemy threat proved a challenge. The area was full of civilians, and mingling among them were deserters from the *11th Infantry Division*, elements of the *Ba'ath Party militia*, and *Fedayeen militia*. Much of the incoming fire received was coming from the west and from north of the river; this could be dealt with by the battalion's organic assets and artillery from 1st Battalion, 10th Marines. However, some of the fire came from small pockets of resistance that were within the sectors of adjacent units, making it difficult to counter them with direct fire or to coordinate indirect fire.

Lieutenant Colonel Brent Dunahoe and the Marines of his battalion developed several techniques over the next few days to deal with these challenges. They patrolled aggressively, entering residences to deny havens to enemy fighters. They used counterbattery radar and artillery to neutralize enemy mortars. The battalion's officers, with the help of skilled Marine pilots, also found innovative ways to use air support. Dunahoe and his battalion also maximized the use of scout-sniper teams to gather information and attrit enemy forces, as well as human

exploitation teams to gather information on enemy positions that could be used in the next day's operations. During the early evening hours of the 25th, Companies K and L advanced 200 to 300 meters in the midst of sandstorms, heavy rain, and enemy fire to a small canal that ran from north to south. Meanwhile, the battalion staff began planning for the next day's operations, using information that the human exploitation teams had already gathered by interrogating civilians and enemy prisoners. These efforts produced invaluable information on enemy positions and *Ba'ath Party* headquarters.¹²⁶

For 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, the main event of the 25th was the forward passage of lines by RCT-1 of 1st Marine Division. The lead battalion of RCT-1, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, laid down heavy suppressive fire as it traveled through the darkness up Ambush Alley and ceased firing as it crossed the Saddam Canal bridge. RCT-2 and RCT-1 had carefully planned and coordinated the procedures for the passage of lines, to include position markings. However, as 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, began approaching the positions of 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, some began firing again, sending thousands of small-arms rounds toward Company B, 1st Battalion, 2d



Photo by LCpl Bryan J. Nealy

Marines of Task Force Tarawa distribute food to citizens of Nasiriyah. The Marines were conducting humanitarian operations like the one pictured above as early as 26 March.

Marines, from a range of less than 200 meters. Lieutenant Colonel Rickey Grabowski sent word for every vehicle in his battalion to mark its position with chemical lights and then personally stopped the head of the convoy. However, this was not before one Marine attached to Company B was wounded by the fire.^{*127}

For the next several days, a familiar pattern prevailed for 1st Battalion, 2d Marines. Company A continued to guard the western “T” intersection and northwestern bridge to prevent enemy fighters from using that route to reinforce the Nasiriyah garrison. Company B and Company C continued to man the “T” intersection due north of the Saddam Canal bridge, Company B blocking toward the east, and Company C to the north. Often *Fedayeen* militia attempted to probe their positions. Each night, Marine artillery pounded enemy targets in the city. During daylight hours, Iraqi soldiers dressed in civilian attire attempted to escape the city and ran into Company A’s checkpoint. Over the next nine days, the company took and processed 126 enemy prisoners. The Marines of

1st Battalion, 2d Marines, conducted patrols, cordon-and-search operations, established roadblocks, and executed limited objective attacks. Meanwhile, the battalion was also already conducting civil affairs programs. The Marines distributed food and water, provided medical care, coordinated repairs on the city’s water treatment and sewage plants, and identified key leaders in the community.¹²⁸

On 26 March, high winds and dust clouds continued to affect operations. Helicopters could not fly for most of the day due to the dust storm; only fixed-wing air support was available. By this time, Task Force Tarawa had firm control of three of the four bridges in Nasiriyah. Traversing the length of Ambush Alley was no longer a serious problem. The Marines, however, did not control the southwestern bridge. Brigadier General Natonski did not have the forces available to seize it, nor to go into the heart of the city north of the Euphrates and clear each block. He and his Marines were still trying to expand control north of the Saddam Canal and south of the Euphrates.¹²⁹

Thus, throughout 26 and 27 March, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, continued to

** Other officers besides Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski exposed themselves to fire in an attempt to stop the potential fratricide, including Company B’s forward air controller, Captain Santare.*

expand their perimeters. Fighting house to house, they captured and killed numerous *Fedayeen* and *Ba'ath militia* and seized or destroyed large quantities of enemy arms, munitions, documents, maps, and other intelligence information. Their successes yielded valuable information that guided tactical planning for operations for the next day. Much of the intelligence included details of enemy activity or headquarters in a particular building. Based on that detailed information, Marines could target particular residences or public buildings for “house calls.”¹³⁰ For example, the Marines of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, seized a *Ba'ath Party* headquarters on 26 March, and over the next few days captured more high-level headquarters, a general and a colonel in the Iraqi army, and maps and documents revealing locations of



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples
This wall map was found in a *Ba'ath Party* headquarters in the southern sector of Nasiriyah. It clearly identifies Iraqi defensive sectors throughout the city.

other headquarters, military facilities, and personnel. The *Ba'ath Party* headquarters had a room rigged to act as an interrogation chamber. It also had a terrain model showing enemy positions throughout the city; a census of everyone living in the city, along with addresses; and discarded weapons and U.S. Army uniforms. Human exploitation teams began to conclude, correctly as it turned out, that U.S. Army prisoners had been in the building and subsequently had been moved to an Iraqi hospital north of the Euphrates. Meanwhile, the terrain model and captured documents helped the battalion staff plan for the next day's attacks.¹³¹

Due to the sandstorm, the infantrymen often had to rely on mortars and artillery rather than aircraft for fire support. Company F cleared the hospital complex for a second time on 26 March, this time with the help of an artillery preparation from 1st Battalion, 10th Marines. Instead of withdrawing, Company F's Marines continued eastward and cleared 12 more buildings. Company G advanced as well and tied its left flank in with Company F's right. Company E, having been relieved from its original position west of the highway, attacked to the southwest and tied in with Company G's right.¹³²

The air assets were not completely out of the battle. Captain Gerald T. Finnegan Jr., a forward air controller with 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, noted that often helicopters could “sneak up under” the sandstorm. Even during the sandstorm, visibility in the nondesert grassy areas close to the Euphrates River could be as much as 300 or 400 meters if there was daylight and if the helicopters were flying low enough to be under the dust cloud. The forward air controllers and air officer for 3d Battalion, Captain Harold Qualkinbush, found a way to conduct Type III close air support with fixed-wing aircraft on the nights of the 26th and 27th. Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe had authorized the use of Type III support without his direct approval as long as each mission was cleared by the air officer or battalion fire support coordinator. Qualkinbush had a laptop computer with digital imagery and a satellite picture of the city. He had targets supplied to him from the battalion's scout-sniper teams and human exploitation teams. Thus, while he did not have direct line-of-sight observation to his targets, he did have indirect, or virtual, observation. His forward air controllers communicated with the aircrafts as they flew overhead and fired their ordnance. One of the enemy targets destroyed in this way was the *11th Infantry Division* headquarters, only 600 meters away, from which elements of the battalion were taking indirect fire. Thus Type III close air support worked for 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, unlike the case of 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, a few days before. With the 3d Battalion, there was solid communication between the forward air controllers and the air officer. Moreover, Captain Qualkinbush had far better targeting information than Captain Santare had enjoyed, and at least had the advantage of indirect, or virtual, observation of the target.* Qualkinbush and his forward air controllers also used Type II support.¹³³

* Though one interview suggested that this use of Type III CAS occurred on 26 and 27 March, the command chronology of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines (part III), indicated that it may have actually occurred on 27 and 28 March. Capt Gerald J. Finnegan Jr. telephone intvw with LtCol Rod Andrew Jr., 10Sept08.

Still, poor weather conditions left artillery the supporting arm of choice on 26 March, making it a busy and memorable day for 1st Battalion, 10th Marines. After supporting Company F's attack on the hospital complex, the artillerymen fired numerous counterfire missions generated by counterbattery radar, as well as calls for fire against enemy *Fedayeen*, artillery, and a refueling station. The targets were located all over Nasiriyah. As the battalion's command chronology summarized, by dusk, the battalion had engaged seven enemy artillery batteries; an ammunition dump with four enemy howitzers; a refueling point with armored personnel carriers and trucks; a convoy with infantry; and a BM21 multiple rocket launcher, resulting in destruction of 44 tubes of artillery, more than 25 vehicles, several buildings, a military complex, a refueling site, and an estimated 400 enemy casualties.¹³⁴

But the work of the artillerymen was not over. Throughout the day, intelligence reports had been coming down from I MEF headquarters (originally generated by human sources and signals intelligence) of a large assembly of enemy fighters gathering in an open area near the railway station south of the southwestern bridge. Initial reports estimated that there were more than 1,000 irregular Iraqi soldiers assembled; a later estimate gave the figure of 2,000. Intelligence indicated that their intent was to launch a major counterattack and seize control of the southeastern bridge. These reports seemed to correspond with counterbattery radar detections in that area throughout the day. Finally it was determined that the reports were credible and a real threat. Air support was unavailable due to the continuing high winds, blowing sand, and low visibility. Therefore, 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, received the mission and fired a "battalion" volley of dual-purpose improved conventional munitions at the target. Due to the spread of ammunition on the batteries' gun lines and to the fact that only four of Battery A's guns could reach the target, the battalion actually fired 105 rounds of dual-purpose improved conventional munitions and 30 high-explosive rounds with variable time fuzes. It was difficult to get a precise battle damage assessment from this mission, but the effects were apparently dramatic. Brigadier General Natonski believed that the barrage "broke the back" of the counterattack that the enemy was trying to launch on the night of the 26th.¹³⁵

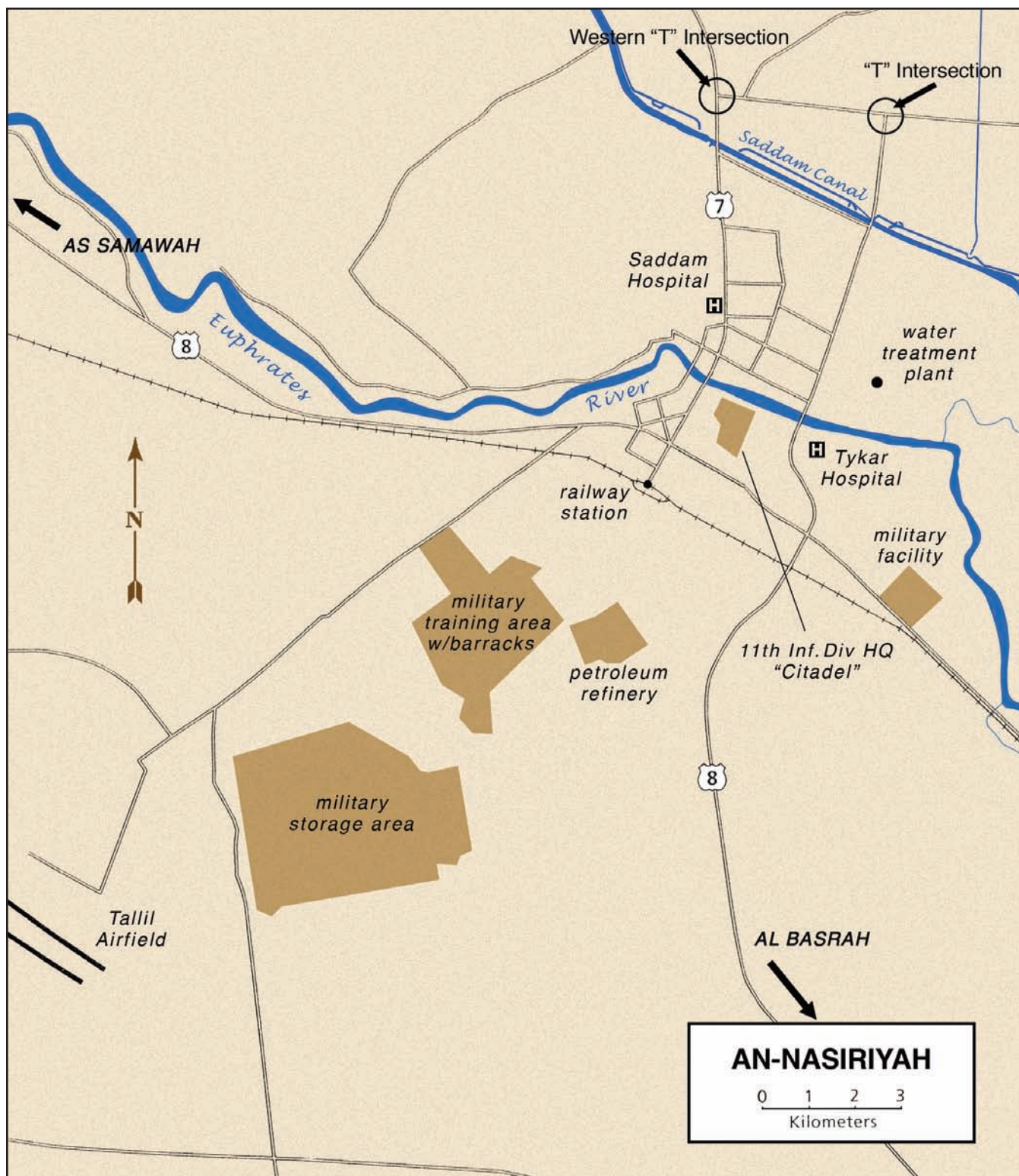
Not all of the enemy fighters were at the railroad station, however. Thus, while the massive fire mission of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, probably ruined enemy plans for a major coordinated counterattack, there were smaller engagements throughout the night south of the Euphrates.

Elements of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines; 2d Battalion, 8th Marines; 2d Combat Engineer Battalion; 2d LAR Battalion; Battery B, 1st Battalion, 10th Marines; and the RCT-2 command post all reported enemy contact.¹³⁶

The most notable action occurred at the main command post of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines. Around sundown (approximately 2030), several fire-team sized elements began attacking the command post. Eventually, it was receiving impacts from small arms, rockets, machine guns, and mortars. Clerks, drivers, radio operators, and others ran to the berms to defend the perimeter. The battalion executive officer, Major Julian D. Alford, relayed a "danger close" immediate suppression mission through his commander, Lieutenant Colonel Royal Mortenson, who in turn was able to contact Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Starnes of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, on the regimental tactical net. About this time, the bulk of Captain Gregory L. Grunwald's Company C, 2d LAR Battalion, was approaching the area. The lead platoon of Grunwald's column had moved very close to the command post of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines. The column was returning from north of the Saddam Canal and was moving south to link up with a Marine wing support squadron convoy to escort it back north through Ambush Alley. Just as it had crossed over the southeastern bridge, it had entered terrain held by 3d Battalion, 2d Marines. Then it had to traverse an area not controlled by friendly forces and probably occupied by the enemy before reentering friendly lines near the command post of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines.¹³⁷

The regimental fire support coordinator and Major Alford had a good idea of all friendly locations but quickly determined that the armor on the LAV-25s would protect the platoon from effects of the danger close mission about to be fired in support of the command post of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines. Doubtless unaware of all the details of the situation, however, the platoon commander of the lead LAR platoon sent a "check firing" message in response to the first artillery round. Eventually, the LAR platoon was ordered to disengage and move away to allow 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, to continue firing the immediate suppression. Alford called the final immediate suppression mission within 100 meters of the command post. It was approved by Lieutenant Colonel Mortenson and fired by 1st Battalion, 10th Marines. Despite it being a danger close mission fired at night, there were no friendly casualties, and the enemy was silenced.¹³⁸

Sometime during this engagement (it is difficult to determine exactly when from various accounts), the lead LAR platoon and the command post of 2d Battalion, 8th



Map illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

Marines, began firing on each other. The platoon may have been slightly disoriented and unaware of the command post's location. On the other hand, it might be that Marines at the command post, aware of a report of an enemy armored vehicle (BTR-60) nearby, saw a LAV-25, mistook it for Iraqi, and fired on it.¹³⁹ Eventually, it

became clear that a friendly fire situation was occurring, and officers, initially led by Captain Grunwald, were able to implement a cease-fire. The light armored reconnaissance platoon perhaps inflicted more material damage on the command post than the enemy did. By the time the Marines ceased firing at each other, the LAV-25's

small arms and 25mm guns had destroyed four vehicles (a wrecker and three medium tactical vehicles) and damaged five Humvees. Thirty Marines in the general area of the command post of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, were wounded, although some of those were certainly wounded by enemy fire. It will never be entirely certain what happened during this episode. What is clear is that the engagement was a sober reminder of the difficulties in fighting on a nonlinear battlefield against an asymmetrical enemy using guerrilla tactics and at night. As an officer from 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, summarized, when the LAR Marines came over the southeastern bridge, they were executing a “rearward passage of lines through us, in the dark, then into enemy-controlled areas, and then into friendly area again.”¹⁴⁰ Determining friend from foe is difficult enough at night or on a nonlinear battlefield. With all of these elements in place at once, it is notable that such incidents did not occur more often.¹⁴¹

27 March-2 April—Consolidation and Rescue: “The Bad Guys Have Left the City”

By the morning of 27 March, Task Force Tarawa had kept the eastern bridges and eastern passage through Nasiriyah open for 48 hours. This accomplishment had enabled the 1st Marine Division to continue its drive toward Baghdad as planned, ready to fight the *Baghdad* and *Al Nida Republican Guard* divisions and divert attention away from the Coalition’s main effort, 3d Infantry Division of V Corps. Clearly though, Nasiriyah was still a potential threat to the rear of Coalition forces and to its supply lines. The Iraqis still retained a strong presence in the city, and Task Force Tarawa was not large enough to remove this threat on its own.¹⁴²

Few had anticipated the Iraqi Army, *Fedayeen* militia and *Ba’ath Party* fighters having such a formidable force in the area or making such a determined defense. The Marines of Task Force Tarawa, with the help of close air support, had managed to kill and capture hundreds of enemy fighters and inflict massive damage on Iraqi regular army forces. Still, the enemy had been able to infiltrate large numbers of *Saddam Fedayeen*, *Ba’ath Party Militia*, and regular army forces into the city by foot and in civilian vehicles. Captured documents gathered on 24 March showed that in the days just before the battle, the Iraqis had been able to move the *504th Infantry Brigade* of the *34th Infantry Division* from northeastern Iraq into Nasiriyah. On 19 March, that brigade consisted of more than 2,000 soldiers, which reinforced the units that Coalition intelligence had already known to be in the city, as well as elements of the *51st Mechanized Infantry*

Division filtering back from Basrah. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski’s interview with a captured officer of the *23d Brigade* revealed that there were 500 to 800 *Fedayeen* fighters in the city when the battle began. Though the enemy had been unable to hold the bridges or prevent the flow of Coalition forces and supplies through the eastern side of Nasiriyah, the Marines anticipated that they would continue to use guerrilla tactics to “attrite and slow the advance of Coalition Forces.” Task Force Tarawa’s intelligence summary from 27 March predicted that the enemy would “continue to intimidate the local population to prevent support for Coalition Forces. Iraqi paramilitary forces will continue to utilize no-strike infrastructure such as hospitals and public buildings to avoid the targeting of their command and control and to show the population they can withstand Coalition attacks.”¹⁴³ Brigadier General Natonski needed more combat power available to him if he was to establish unchallenged Coalition control of Nasiriyah and eliminate the threat to the rear of V Corps and I MEF.¹⁴⁴

The I MEF commander, Lieutenant General James Conway, seems to have recognized this need as early as the second day of the battle. On the afternoon of 24 March, Conway and Brigadier General John F. Kelly, assistant division commander of 1st Marine Division, had visited Natonski, Colonel Bailey, and Lieutenant Colonel Mortenson at the position of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, just south of the Euphrates River bridge. As generals Conway and Natonski discussed the situation, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, came under heavy indirect fire. Artillery rounds began snapping some high-tension power lines overhead, creating a fearful racket. As Natonski remembered it, “all hell broke loose.”¹⁴⁵ Conway’s sergeant major, driver, and personal security guard joined the lines of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, on the eastern side of the highway as Conway and Natonski continued to confer. Natonski believed that it was that afternoon when Conway realized that Task Force Tarawa would need help securing Nasiriyah. It would be days, however, before Conway could get it to them.¹⁴⁶

At a meeting on the 27th, however, Brigadier General Natonski learned that soon his mission, battlespace, and forces available would all expand. Task Force Tarawa’s battlespace was extended to the south, east, and west to allow it to isolate Nasiriyah and stop the flow of enemy reinforcements into the city. The task force was also tasked with advancing into the city itself to eliminate *Fedayeen* and *Ba’ath Party* cells. To help Natonski accomplish this mission, I MEF would designate Task Force Tarawa the focus of main effort, give it priority of fires, and give it tactical control of 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit and



Official Marine Corps Photo

BGen Richard F. Natonski in Task Force Tarawa combat operations center in Nasiriyah.

15th Marine Expeditionary Unit. The official fragmentary order expanding Natonski's battlespace was published on 27 March. On the 28th, another fragmentary order (I MEF FragO 040-03) gave the task force its new missions and ordered it to be prepared to assume tactical control of the 15th and 24th MEUs.¹⁴⁷

The 15th MEU did not arrive until 29 March and began patrolling on the 31st.¹⁴⁸ The commanding officer and operations officer of 24th MEU arrived at Task Force Tarawa's command post on 1 April. When the 15th MEU did arrive, Brigadier General Natonski gave it the task of securing the southwestern entrances to the city in the vicinity of the southwestern bridge, or, as Natonski called it, "the final entranceway."¹⁴⁹ Over the course of the previous week, intelligence had indicated that a hotbed of *Fedayeen* and *Ba'ath* activity was in the city of Suq ash Shuyukh, southeast of Nasiriyah. The enemy was sending reinforcements from this city into Nasiriyah from the east, while others came from the south into the western side of the city. Task Force Tarawa needed to isolate the city to keep them out.¹⁵⁰

During this period, the task force received excellent support from Special Operations Forces from Task Force 20, including U.S. Army Special Forces and U.S. Navy Sea Air Land Teams (SEALs). These were working in Task Force Tarawa's area of operations and reported to it. There was a reconnaissance operations center colocated with the Task Force Tarawa command post. This group had teams penetrating into the heart of the city, interrogating civilians, and locating buildings in the city that were *Ba'ath* or *Fedayeen* positions. Once these were identified, they were attacked with precision joint direct attack munitions and AC-130 strikes delivered by U.S. Air Forces Special

Operations Command. Another Navy SEAL team was performing the same task in Suq ash Shuyukh. In both cities, Coalition forces were using these special operations teams and precision air strikes to eliminate key leadership targets with minimal or no collateral damage to civilian structures nearby. The Marines also established more roadblocks to prevent infiltration of enemy forces. The 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, had already accomplished this on the northern side of the city, but now it was done on the eastern side as well.¹⁵¹

Meanwhile, the infantry battalions continued to patrol aggressively east and west of the bridge crossings, sweeping their sectors clean of enemy fighters and weapons and seizing documents from *Fedayeen* and *Ba'ath Party* facilities. On 27 March, for example, a scout-sniper team from 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, crossed just over the Euphrates River near the bridge and searched a building where suspicious activity had been observed. It proved to be a *Ba'ath Party* headquarters with a great deal of intelligence, including maps and graphics identifying the locations of enemy strongpoints and headquarters buildings. All the while, Marines also continued to distribute beans, rice, and water to the inhabitants of Nasiriyah and to do what they could to facilitate the city's reconstruction.¹⁵²

By 27 March, the battle had changed in a way that influenced the operations of Lieutenant Colonel Starnes's artillery battalion. Most of the Iraqis' indirect fire threat had been eliminated. Therefore, instead of dispersing the batteries and individual howitzers, Starnes consolidated them into a triangular firebase, making them less vulnerable to the threat of small teams of enemy soldiers infiltrating the perimeter. Combat engineer assets allowed the vehicles and howitzers of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, to be "bermed in" within raised earthworks for protection. The artillerymen named the compound "Firebase Pokorney" for First Lieutenant Fred Pokorney, their forward observer killed north of the Saddam Canal on the 23d while calling in a fire mission for Company C, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines.¹⁵³

Battery B temporarily converted into provisional infantry. Regimental Combat Team 2 sought to strengthen its hold on the Highway 1 bridge to the west, which was still vital to the 1st Marine Division's supply line. The infantry battalions did not have any Marines to spare for this mission, so Lieutenant Colonel Starnes volunteered the services of Battery B. Along with four of its howitzers dug in around the bridge and deployed for direct fire, Battery B made up the core of Task Force Rex, commanded by the executive officer of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines. Joining the artillerymen were Company A, 2d Reconnaissance

Battalion; a detachment of combat engineers; and a light armored reconnaissance platoon. As much of Task Force Rex was dug in underneath the bridge, it soon acquired the nickname Task Force Troll. The fact that 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, was able to take four guns out of action reflected that it was receiving far fewer missions than it had previously, and that the infantrymen of RCT-2 were now able to eliminate most of the resistance they encountered without artillery support.¹⁵⁴

On 29 March, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, launched an assault on a four-story, reinforced military compound that the battalion's officers had nicknamed "the citadel." Intelligence indicated that the building was the headquarters for the enemy's *11th Infantry Division*. When planning for the attack commenced on 28 March, Company K, commanded by Captain Edward J. Healey Jr., was designated as the main effort, and plans were made for a heavy artillery preparation prior to the assault.



Photo courtesy of Col Paul B. Dunahoe

The "citadel" building south of the Euphrates, shortly after its capture by Company K, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines. Sniper teams were posted on the roof. Col Ronald J. Johnson, G-3 operations officer of Task Force Tarawa, looks through a sniper scope. LtCol Paul B. Dunahoe, commanding officer of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, holds binoculars. On the far right is Sgt Christopher M. Sharon, the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, scout-sniper team chief.

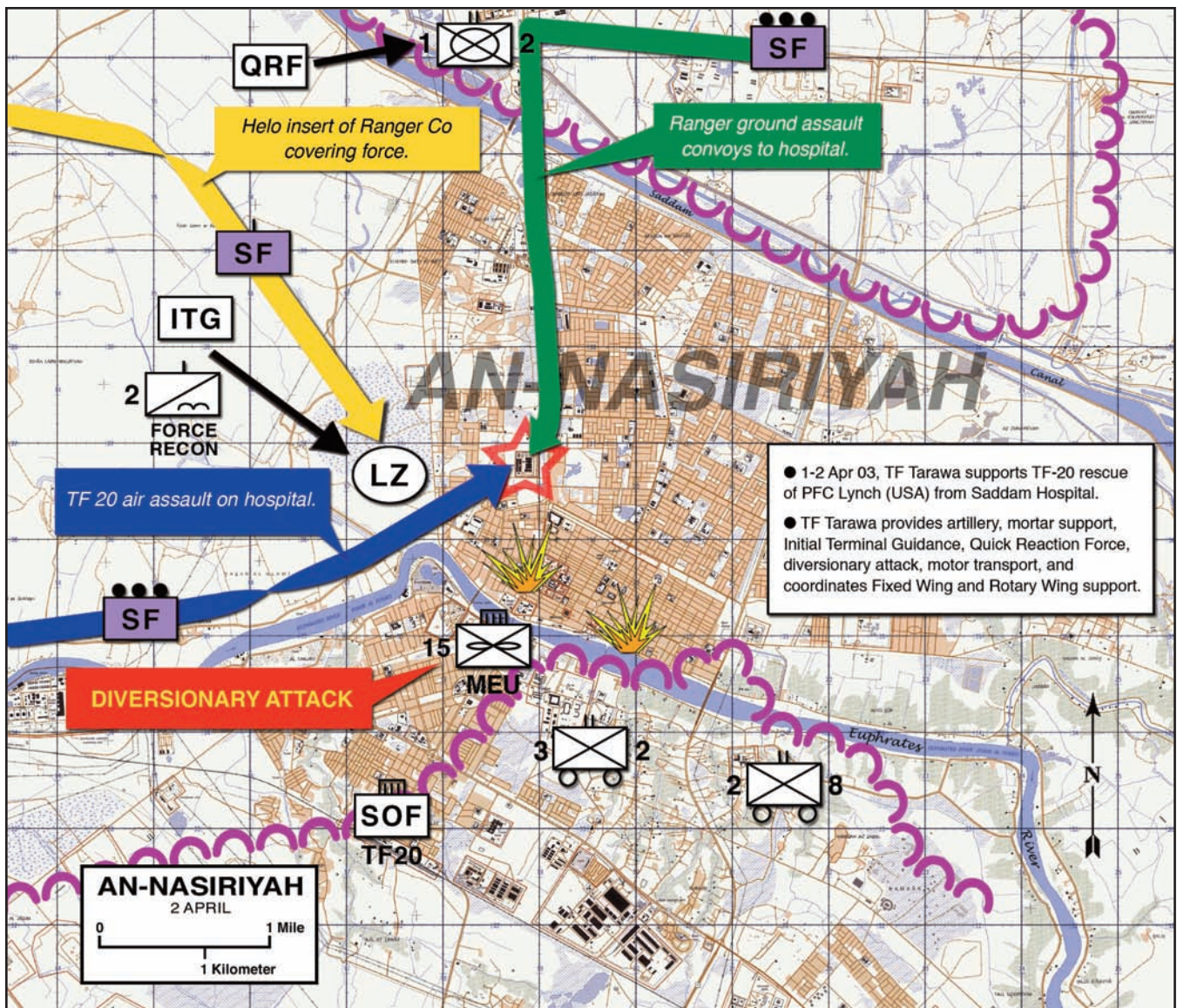
However, a scout-sniper team that Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe had sent into the area late on the 27th later determined that there was a great deal of civilian traffic in and around the compound. In an effort to avoid civilian casualties, Dunahoe cancelled plans for the artillery barrage and instead directed Company K to launch a surprise predawn assault. Companies I and L prepared to act as supporting elements. Company K moved into its assault position under cover of darkness and began its attack at 0530. The Marines captured, killed, or wounded a handful of Iraqi soldiers while suffering no casualties. Within the compound, they found massive quantities of ammunition, including 1,000 rockets, 1 million small

arms rounds, mines, tank rounds, and chemical warfare defense equipment. Explosive ordnance experts later estimated that more than 25,000 metric tons of munitions and explosives were stored within the compound.¹⁵⁵ One officer remembered that the stockpile was enough to fill a large basketball coliseum. The scout-sniper team's report of civilian traffic in the area and the decision not to use artillery on the compound had been fortuitous, as a large artillery bombardment would have almost certainly set off secondary explosions with catastrophic results for Marines and civilians in the vicinity.¹⁵⁶

The Marines seized the compound so quickly and efficiently that when dawn broke, few enemy officers seemed to know that the attack had occurred. Many Iraqi Army personnel drove or walked to work in the compound as usual that morning, not realizing until they were captured that the compound was in Marine hands. Major Canfield remembered that an Iraqi officer walking toward the complex with his briefcase and a cup of coffee got to within a few yards of the building before realizing that American weapons were pointed at him. He immediately raised his hands in surrender. Captain Healey's Company K Marines killed two armed enemy soldiers as they attempted to enter the compound in a pickup truck shortly after the compound was secured.¹⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Marine scout-snipers in the complex engaged several *Saddam Fedayeen* militia maneuvering against the complex, killing one of them at a range of 550 meters and another at 750 meters.¹⁵⁸

On 31 March, 15th MEU began securing its assigned sector around the southwestern bridge. It was also during this period that an Iraqi lawyer walked over the southwestern bridge, approached the lines of Company I, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, under the command of First Lieutenant J. Todd Widman, and provided fascinating information. "Mohammed" gave the battalion's human exploitation team intelligence about the *Fedayeen* and their locations. Later he also stated that a wounded American soldier named Jessica was in the Saddam Hospital, a complex on the western side of the city a few hundred meters north of the southwestern bridge. Mohammed claimed that the soldier had been tortured.* When requested, Mohammed agreed to go back to the hospital and ascertain Private First Class Lynch's exact location within the structure. While his wife and daughter remained with the Marines, he walked back over the bridge that night and returned with more detailed information. Mohammed's wife had worked as a nurse in

* Lynch herself later denied any recollections of torture or physical abuse while in captivity.



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the hospital, and she helped produce sketches of the building floor plan and surrounding grounds.¹⁵⁹

By 31 March, Task Force 20 had set up its command post within the Task Force Tarawa command post, and together the two organizations planned an operation to rescue Private First Class Lynch and any other Americans who might be at the hospital. The operation would take place on the night of 1 April. Instead of special operations forces supporting Task Force Tarawa, Task Force Tarawa would become the supporting effort for Task Force 20's rescue operation. To support the rescue, 15th MEU would launch a diversionary attack on the southwestern bridge. Artillery and air assets would also create a diversion by striking *Ba'ath* facilities just south of the hospital. The 3d Marine Aircraft Wing supplied the helicopter support for Rangers who were to land west of

the hospital and provide security and establish an emergency landing site. The 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, contributed tanks and assault amphibian vehicles as a quick reaction force located at the northwestern bridge that could be sent forward quickly in case anything went wrong. The 2d Force Reconnaissance Company provided survey of the rescue site, covering fire with sniper overwatch, terminal guidance into the Rangers' landing zone, and a medium tactical vehicle with a .50-caliber machine gun for the ground assault portion of the operation.

The Rangers landed at midnight on 1 April, and Navy SEALs entered the hospital about the same time. Within 20 to 25 minutes of their arrival, Private First Class Lynch was on a helicopter and flying away from the Saddam Hospital. After several hours, the Rangers located and evacuated the



Department of Defense Video Frame Capture
PFC Jessica D. Lynch, USA, shortly after her rescue by U.S. forces from the Saddam Hospital in Nasiriyah on the night of 1-2 April 2003.

body of one Marine killed in Ambush Alley and the bodies of the missing members of the 507th Maintenance Company. Every American killed at Nasiriyah went home. The rescue and recovery operation by Task Force 20 and Task Force Tarawa was a textbook operation in terms of joint planning and execution among numerous arms and branches of service. Every objective was accomplished, and there were no friendly casualties.¹⁶⁰

The next day, 2 April, Brigadier General Natonski considered declaring Nasiriyah secure. Before doing so, he rode over all four bridges and along roads and streets throughout the city. He visited the Saddam Hospital, saw Lynch's former room, and talked to the hospital staff. He noticed ordinary citizens outside their houses conducting their daily business and saw Coalition forces attempting to address their immediate needs. There would still be minor incidents after April 2, but Natonski concluded on that day that all main enemy headquarters had been eliminated and, for the most part, the "bad guys had left the city."¹⁶¹



Photo Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples
Marines speak with Iraqi citizens in Nasiriyah on 31 March 2003. Conversations such as these built rapport with the people and often generated information.

There was no time for the Marines of Task Force Tarawa to relax after their victory. Brigadier General Natonski tasked 15th MEU with holding onto Nasiriyah with a robust civil affairs program. Occasionally these Marines had to skirmish with isolated pockets of resistance in the city, but most of their work involved helping to rebuild and return life to normal for the people of Nasiriyah. The 24th MEU moved north up Highway 7 to secure Qalat Sikar airfield. RCT-2 advanced up Highway 1 to secure ad-Diwaniyah, an-Numaniyah, al-Hillah, and ultimately al-Amaraha and al-Kut. All of these operations were designed to provide security for the main supply routes and protect the flow of supplies as 1st Marine Division continued its march toward Baghdad. The war continued, and there was plenty of danger ahead, but Nasiriyah was the toughest battle that the Marines of Task Force Tarawa would fight.¹⁶²

Epilogue

Nasiriyah was a defining battle of the 2003 Iraq campaign in many ways. Coalition forces discovered much about their enemy and his tactics; they learned many important tactical and operational lessons; and the Iraqi Army commanders realized that it would be virtually impossible to stop determined U.S. Marines. Some of the things the Marines learned about the Iraqis were of immediate tactical and operational importance. The Marines could expect the enemy to use dummy positions, such as hulks of tanks, and to place them in front of buildings to create pillboxes. The enemy was apt to use hospitals, mosques, and schools as arms caches and defensive positions, taking advantage of the Americans' determination not to violate international laws of war and reluctance to harm civilians. Also in violation of the Geneva Convention, most Iraqi soldiers did not fight in uniform, but rather were in civilian clothes. The primary mission of the *Fedayeen* and other paramilitary forces, in fact, was to blend in with the civilian population, use members of it as human shields, and seek to stiffen resistance by the population and regular army forces against Coalition forces.

Against these Iraqi tactics, human intelligence, particularly from special operations forces and human exploitation teams, was extremely useful and helpful. The battle certainly proved the value of tanks in urban terrain and validated the effectiveness of snipers in urban combat as well. Scout-sniper teams not only accounted for dozens of enemy casualties but also gathered extensive intelligence by means of observation, capture of enemy personnel, and contact with Iraqi civilians. Artillery also

Battle of An-Nasiriyah

played a vital role, particularly when weather conditions precluded or hampered the use of aircraft. Additionally, the battle provided an example of how quickly an artillery battery could transition into the role of a provisional rifle company, as in the case of Task Force Rex.¹⁶³

Air support, both fixed-wing, and rotary, was also critical. AH-1W Cobra helicopters, in particular, were very effective in the urban environment. They controlled the rooftops, which proved vital in Nasiriyah, a city filled with buildings with flat roofs from which the enemy tried to fire on Coalition forces. The Cobras often played an important role in observation and were able to destroy enemy armored vehicles, artillery, and mortars with their own fire. Their very presence often boosted the morale of Marines on the ground and simultaneously had the opposite effect on the enemy. Sometimes the sound of their rotors suppressed enemy fire and sent Iraqi soldiers or militiamen scrambling for cover, an effect that forward air controllers called “suppression by noise.” Generally, the Cobras were able to avoid deadly effects from enemy ground fire. Iraqi rockets were a minimal threat as long as the Cobras made “runs” at a speed of 60 knots or more, firing as they went. Only when hovering in a stationary position were the helicopters seriously vulnerable to enemy fire.¹⁶⁴

Clearly one difficulty encountered in Nasiriyah was that of “friendly fire.” The most serious case was the A-10 incident discussed previously, but there were also two incidents between Marine ground units—one during the RCT-1 passage of lines north of the city, and another between the light armored reconnaissance company and the 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, command post south of the Euphrates. Even with the new “Blue Force Tracker” technology, the fog of war and occasionally the infiltration tactics of the enemy made it difficult to prevent these incidents entirely, particularly at night.

Nasiriyah set the tone for much of the rest of the Iraq war when it came to establishing a rapport with the civilian population. Most residents of the city were Shiites and not particularly loyal to the Saddam Hussein regime. Because of a strong military and paramilitary presence in the city, however, they were reluctant to embrace the Americans until it was safe to do so. In many cases, that occurred immediately once the people realized the Marines were in the city to stay. For example, only minutes after Company B Marines killed two *Republican Guard* officers east of Ambush Alley, civilians rushed into the street with tears of joy, with children crying “thank you” and spitting on the bodies of the dead officers.¹⁶⁵ Others risked their own safety to let the Marines know



Photo by LCpl Christopher G. Graham
A Marine from Task Force Tarawa assists a displaced child in Nasiriyah in late March 2003.

the whereabouts of captured Americans. The Marines began distributing humanitarian aid and working to help rebuild the city within a day or two of entering it. Civil affairs operations became extremely important, and Nasiriyah became a model for how to conduct them.

Another thing that went right at Nasiriyah was the effectiveness of joint planning and execution. Special operations forces from other services worked with Task Force Tarawa headquarters and provided excellent support. The Lynch recovery operation, in particular, was a textbook example of diverse American forces effectively integrating their capabilities. U.S. Army Special Forces and Rangers, U.S. Navy SEALs, U.S. Air Force Special Operations, and U.S. Marine infantry, armor, artillery, air, and intelligence assets all worked together and accomplished the mission with flawless execution.

Understandably and appropriately, Marine leaders gave much thought to what could have been done differently or better at Nasiriyah, particularly considering the relatively high casualty toll. No clear conclusions have emerged, other than that good intelligence was lacking before the battle. Several officers have pointed to the lack of shaping the battlefield by fire before entering the city.

There were no artillery preparations and no air attacks on the city before RCT-2 stormed across the bridges. Yet there were several good reasons for this. First, intelligence estimates seemed to indicate that it would be unnecessary. Second, without more detailed intelligence on specific enemy locations, there was no way to use air attacks or artillery on the city without inflicting significant damage to the city and loss of life on innocent civilians. Doing so would have been counterproductive and perhaps endangered American lives in the long run.

There had also been no reconnaissance of the city before the Marines charged into it. The pace of the campaign and the sense of urgency placed on the seizure of the bridges probably contributed to this omission. Additionally, intelligence sources and planners at higher levels felt sure resistance in the city would be light.

Others have questioned whether it was necessary to seize the eastern Nasiriyah bridges at all. Initially, officers throughout RCT-2 understood that they would bypass the city if they found significant resistance. From the perspective of Lieutenant General James Conway and higher headquarters, however, there was no question that what Task Force Tarawa did at Nasiriyah had to be done. The I MEF and V Corps needed another route to Baghdad besides Highway 1, both to accommodate the traffic flow and to achieve greater dispersion in defense against weapons of mass destruction. Besides, if Nasiriyah was not secured, it would have been a threat to the Highway 1 route itself and to the rear of Coalition forces. Also, RCT-1 needed to secure an airfield on Highway 7 so that a British follow-on brigade would have a means of aerial supply.¹⁶⁶

Other Marines have wondered why it was necessary to push so hard into the city once it became clear that the Iraqis were there in force and intended to fight. Why not prep the route into the city with artillery and air support and wait for the tanks to be completely refueled? This debate often revolves around Brigadier General Natonski's decision to push rapidly into the city and his order to his regimental and battalion commanders to hasten their advance on the morning of 23 March. Again, there are several justifications for the course that was taken. Task Force Tarawa's rapid, relentless drive into the city on 23 March matched the tone of the entire Coalition campaign, which emphasized the use of speed and aggressiveness to attain security and victory. Natonski knew that 1st Marine Division was right behind his task force, and he did not want any delay in seizing the bridges to slow the advance of the rest of I MEF. The unexpected developments with the 507th Maintenance Company also had much to do with Natonski's decision. Once that occurred, he believed that

his task force had lost the advantage of tactical surprise, possibly inducing the Iraqis to destroy the bridges to deny their use to the Americans. The best way to overcome this setback and reduce the possibility of blown bridges, Natonski felt, was with speed and aggressiveness. Indeed, captured Iraqi officers later confessed that they were "shocked" at the aggressiveness of the Marines. One said that "his fighters were very confident initially . . . but became dispirited when the Marines kept coming at them."¹⁶⁷ Finally, and just as importantly, there were wounded and missing Americans in the city. Natonski and other Marines felt an obligation to help.

Without question, the Marines of Task Force Tarawa upheld their Corps' legacy of valor and professionalism at Nasiriyah. Marines continually risked their lives to save others who were wounded or stranded in enemy-controlled parts of the city. When the battle north of the Euphrates devolved into three separate company-level fights, small-unit leadership, a hallmark of the Corps, took over. Junior officers and noncommissioned officers set the example and held their units together through the confusion of combat and shock of heavy casualties. They made difficult decisions under fire and refused to quit or withdraw until they had accomplished their missions. There were numerous cases of Marines continuing to perform their duties with determination even after they were wounded. Individual Marines throughout Task Force Tarawa battled heat, driving rain, fatigue, sandstorms, fear, confusion, and a numerous and resourceful enemy—and performed gallantly. They steadfastly performed their duty, and performed it well, significantly facilitating the Coalition march toward Baghdad.



Photo by Cpl Mace M. Gratz
Marines of Task Force Tarawa assist displaced citizens in Nasiriyah in late March 2003.

Notes

1. Col Nicholas E. Reynolds, *Basrah, Baghdad, and Beyond: The U.S. Marine Corps in the Second Iraq War* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 2, 67.
2. Col Reed R. Bonadonna, "Desert Legion: With Task Force Tarawa in Operation Iraqi Freedom" (typescript, Marine Corps Historical Center [MCHC], Quantico, VA), 8.
3. BGen Richard F. Natonski intvw with LtCol David Watters, 6Mar04 (MCHC), hereafter Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
4. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; LtGen Natonski intvw with Col Patricia D. Saint, LtCol Rod Andrew Jr., and MGySgt Robert A. Yarnall, 19Dec07 (MCHC), hereafter Natonski intvw, 19Dec07.
5. Col Ronald L. Bailey intvw with Maj Jeffery R. Riley, 4May and 10May06 (MCHC), transcript, 2-3, 8-9.
6. Richard S. Lowry, *Marines in the Garden of Eden: The True Story of Seven Bloody Days in Iraq* (New York: Berkley Publishing, 2006), 3-4.
7. Bonadonna, 12; Lowry, 30.
8. Bailey intvw, 9; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04. The description of Mortenson as "articulate and charismatic" comes from Col Bonadonna's observations in Bonadonna, 12.
9. Bonadonna, 12; see also Lowry, 4.
10. Bailey intvw, 10.
11. Bonadonna, 13; Lowry, 4.
12. Bonadonna, 13.
13. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
14. Ibid.; A Co 8th Tank Bn ComdC, 1 Jan03-31Dec04, Section 2, p. 6. All command chronologies cited in this work can be found at the Gray Research Center (GRC), Quantico, VA.
15. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; 2d MEB ComdC 1Jan-30Jun03, Section 2, p. 1.
16. LtCol Royal P. Mortenson intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 2Mar03 (MCHC) hereafter Mortenson intvw, 2Mar03.
17. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; 2d MEB ComdC, Section 2, p. 1.
18. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
19. 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun03, Section 2; 2d Bn, 8th Mar ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun03, Section 2, 2-1; A 8th Tanks, ComdC, Section 2, p. 6.
20. Natonski intvw 6Mar04; Mortenson intvw, 2Mar03; 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun03, Part 2; Lowry, 32.
21. 2d MEB ComdC, Section 2, p. 2.
22. 2d MEB ComdC, Section 2, pp. 2-3; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
23. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
24. Maj Karl C. Rohr, "Fighting Through the Fog of War: Overcoming the Friction Points and Succeeding in Combat," *Marine Corps Gazette Online* (<http://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/2006/06rohr.html>). Maj Rohr was the battalion Fire Support Coordinator and CO of Weapons Company, 1st Bn, 2d Mar, in the battle of an-Nasiriyah.
25. Ibid; Natonski intvws, 6Mar04 and 17Dec07; 2d MEB ComdC, section 2, pp. 2-3; Bonadonna, 23.
26. Col Gregory Fontenot, LtCol E. J. Degen, and LtCol David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 101; Reynolds, 43-44, 84; Lowry, 43, 97.
27. 2d MEB ComdC, Supporting Documents, disk 1, "TF Tarawa—Battle of Nasiriyah"; see also Col Glenn T. Starnes intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 7May03 (MCHC).
28. Col Paul B. Dunahoe phone intvws with LtCol Rod Andrew Jr., 27Aug08 and 17Sept08; "Commander's Intent, Line of Departure to An Nasiriyah," 20Mar03, copies in possession of Col Dunahoe and Col Andrew.
29. Rohr.
30. Task Force Tarawa, "Chronicle of the Combat Actions at Nasiriyah, 22 March-2 April 2003," entry for 22 March (hereafter "Chronicle," [entry date]), in 2d MEB Comd C, Supporting Documents, disk 1.
31. "Chronicle," 22 March; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04. I MEF FRAGO 017-03, 21 March 03, 1.A, 1.B, in "Chronicle," 22 Mar.
32. "Chronicle," 22March; 2d Mar ComdC, Section 2, pp. 19-22 Mar; Bailey intvw, 34.
33. Bailey intvw, 36.
34. Ibid. See also 31-35; Maj Andrew R. Kennedy, intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 7May03 (MCHC), 3-5.
35. Kennedy intvw, 5; Maj Doug Feiring, "Iraqi Freedom Diary" (<http://www.iraqi-freedom-diary.com/relief-in-place.html>).
36. Kennedy intvw, 5; Bailey intvw, 38.
37. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2.
38. LtCol James E. Reilly and SFC Thomas Smith intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 13Apr03 (MCHC).

39. Col Paul B. Dunahoe, notes on draft manuscript, 18Feb09, author's possession.
40. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2; Capt Gerald J. Finnegan Jr. telephone intvw with LtCol Rod Andrew Jr., 10Sept08; Lowry, 277.
41. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
42. LtCol Rickey L. Grabowski intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 6Apr03 (MCHC), 2.
43. Ibid. See also Lowry, 117-18, 149; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Bonadonna, 31 n.#5, 32-34.
44. RCT-2 Narrative Summary, "Chronicle," 23 March.
45. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2, Weapons Company; see also Lowry, 84.
46. 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Section 2
47. Grabowski intvw, 3; "Chronicle," 23 March; 1st Bn 10th Mar ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun03; Bailey intvw, 44; Maj William P. Peeples and 1stSgt Roger D. Huddleston intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 1May03 (MCHC) hereafter Peeples intvw; LtCol Donald S. Hawkins, Maj Craig H. Streeter, Maj Matthew R. Shenberger, and GySgt Kevin Barry intvw with Fred Allison, 13Oct06 (MCHC), transcript, 11 (hereafter Hawkins intvw).
48. Peeples intvw.
49. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Peeples intvw; Company A, 8th Tanks Bn, ComdC, Section 2, p. 7; Hawkins intvw, 13-19, 26-31; Lowry, 130-41.
50. Quotes from Bonadonna, 34. Bonadonna's source was comments made on an earlier draft of his manuscript by LtCol Grabowski (ibid., 128 n. xviii-xix); Bailey intvw, 39, 44; Natonski intvws, 6Mar04 and 17Dec07.
51. Grabowski intvw, 4; 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, section 2; SSgt Troy F. Schielein intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 29Apr03 (MCHC).
52. Grabowski intvw, 5.
53. Ibid; Schielein intvw; Peeples intvw.
54. Grabowski intvw, 5-6; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
55. "Chronicle," 23 March; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Grabowski intvw, 6-7; Huddleston comments in Peeples intvw; Lowry, 174-78.
56. Grabowski intvw, 7; Lowry, 178-79; Hawkins intvw, 16; Huddleston in Peeples intvw; "U.S. Central Command Investigation of Suspected Friendly Fire Incident Near Nasiriyah, Iraq, 23 March 03," Capt A. J. Greene testimony, p. J-107-08 (hereafter CentComm Investigation).
57. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Lowry, 187.
58. Peeples intvw; Maj Michael A. Brooks Jr. intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 4Apr03 (MCHC), transcript, 11; Hawkins intvw, 66-67.
59. 1stLt Michael S. Seely intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 4May03 (MCHC), transcript, 6-10; 2dLt Scott M. Swantner intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna 2May03 (MCHC); Lowry, 187-92.
60. Seely intvw, 9-11; Swantner intvw; Lowry, 187-95.
61. Grabowski intvw, 7; Lowry, 190, 204-8; CentCom Investigation, Testimony of Commander, Bravo Company, pp. J-141, J-147; Capt Dennis A. Santare testimony, Tab H.
62. Seely intvw, 16; Lowry, 205-12; Bonadonna, 48-49; CentCom investigation, Grabowski testimony, pp. J-67, J-72.
63. CentCom investigation, Grabowski testimony, p. J-63; Greene testimony, pp. J-106-109, 111; Santare testimony, pp. H-29-31.
64. CentCom investigation, Santare testimony, p. H-31.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid., p. H-32.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., pp. H-32-33; CentCom investigation, Final Report, 10; Lowry, 199.
69. CentCom investigation, pp. H-22, H-31-33 (quote on H-33).
70. Seely intvw, 18; CentCom investigation, 1stSgt Jose G. Henao testimony, p. J-212; Swantner intvw; SSgt Anthony J. Pompos intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 5May03 (MCHC); Bonadonna, 51, 53.
71. Seely intvw, 18-20; Swantner intvw; Lowry, 214.
72. CentCom investigation, Grabowski testimony, pp. J-67-68; Capt Daniel J. Wittnam testimony, p. J-160; Hawkins intvw, 73.
73. CentCom investigation, Santare testimony, p. H-33; Tab A-H, Final Report, 10.
74. CentCom investigation, Tab A-H, Final Report, 10.
75. Swantner and Seely intvws, and their testimony in CentCom Investigation, Tab J; testimony of other Company C Marines in pp. J-211, J-231-32, J-238-39, J-254, J-259, J-271, J-276, A-E-3, A-F-24, A-F-32.
76. CentCom investigation, Tab A-H, Final Report, 12; 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Section 2.
77. Peeples intvw; Lowry, 259-62.
78. Seely intvw, 22; CentCom investigation, Grabowski testimony, pp. J-70-71; Santare testimony, p. H-33.

79. Seely intvw, 32; CentCom investigation, Tab A-H-3, Final Report, 10.
80. LtGen Richard F. Natonski, notes on draft manuscript, 14Feb09, author's possession.
81. CentCom investigation, Tab A-H-3, Final Report, 27.
82. Ibid.
83. Kennedy intvw, 18-19; Brooks intvw, 15-17; Peebles intvw; Grabowski intvw, 8; Bonadonna, 60.
84. "Chronicle," 23 March.
85. Brooks intvw, 19-20.
86. LtCol Grabowski remembers that Company A arrived at the northern bridge sometime around 1600 or 1700; Brooks remembers 1600. Grabowski intvw, 24; Brooks intvw, 17, 20.
87. Kennedy intvw, 18.
88. LtCol Royal P. Mortenson, intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 28Mar03 (MCHC); hereafter Mortenson intvw, 28Mar03.
89. Grabowski intvw, 13.
90. "Chronicle," 23 March, records that 1st Bn, 2d Mar reported the Saddam Canal bridge secure at 1128 Zulu, 1428 local time. Company C was still engaged in a vicious firefight at that time and had still not been reinforced by other elements of the battalion.
91. Bailey intvw, 50-51; 2d Bn, 8th Mar ComdC, pp. II-1, II-2.
92. Mortenson intvw, 28Mar03.
93. "Chronicle," 23 March.
94. Mortenson intvw, 28Mar03, Kennedy intvw, p. 16.
95. "Chronicle," CG's Personal Journal, 23 March.
96. 1st Bn, 10th Mar ComdC; Starnes intvw.
97. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Kennedy intvw, 11-12; CentComm investigation, Grabowski testimony, p. J-81.
98. Natonski intvw, 17Dec07.
99. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Kennedy intvw, 11-12.
100. LtCol Grabowski's in-depth interview with the captured executive officer of the *23d Brigade* revealed that the defeat of the 507th Maintenance Company had "emboldened" the Iraqis (see Grabowski intvw, 21; CentCom investigation, Grabowski testimony, p. J-84).
101. Ibid.
102. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
103. Ibid.
104. Ibid.; LtGen Richard F. Natonski, notes on draft manuscript, 14Feb09, author's possession.
105. Gen Eric K. Shinseki to Gen Michael W. Hagee, 10 June 2003, copies in possession of the author and LtGen Richard F. Natonski.
106. Brooks intvw, 8-9; CentCom investigation, Grabowski testimony, p. J-81; Schielein intvw; Bonadonna, 45 (based on interview with SSgt Lonnie O. Parker).
107. Kennedy intvw, 20.
108. 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Section 2; Brooks intvw, 25-29; Schielein intvw; Bonadonna, 67.
109. 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Section 2; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Bonadonna, 67.
110. "Chronicle," 24 March; 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Section 2; 1st Bn, 10th Mar ComdC.
111. Lowry, 274.
112. 2d Bn, 8th Mar ComdC, Scout-Sniper Platoon Chronology, Item 5, p. 5; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
113. 2d Bn, 8th Mar ComdC, Section 2, p. II-2, and Item 4, pp. 1-2; Bonadonna, 69; Lowry, 284-85; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
114. LtGen Natonski, comments on draft manuscript, 14Feb09, author's possession.
115. 2d Bn, 8th Mar ComdC, Section 2; Mortenson intvw, 28Mar03.
116. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Kennedy intvw, 19-20; LtCol Daniel T. Canfield phone intvw with LtCol Rod Andrew Jr., 3Sept08; Dunahoe intvw, 17Sept08.
117. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2.
118. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; "Chronicle," 24 March.
119. I MEF FRAGO 023-3 in "Chronicle," 24 March.
120. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2; Canfield intvw; Lowry, 328.
121. Ibid., Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
122. 2d Bn, 8th Mar ComdC, Item 4, p. 2.
123. Ibid., Item 2, p. 4; 1st Bn, 10th Mar ComdC; "Chronicle," CG's Personal Journal, 25 March. The comment on visibility during the dust storm comes from an article written anonymously by a Marine colonel and first sergeant from Task Force Tarawa and published on www.urbanoperations.com. It is also found in 2d MEB ComdC, Supporting Documents, disk 1, "Lessons Learned;" hereafter "Lessons Learned."
124. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; 2d Bn 8th Mar ComdC, item 3, p. 3, and p. II-3; Mortenson intvw, 28Mar03.

125. Mortenson intvw, 28Mar03; 2d Bn 8th Mar ComdC, item 3, p. 3, item 5, p. 7.
126. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2; Canfield intvw; Dunahoe intvw, 27Aug08.
127. 1st Bn 2d Mar ComdC, Section 2, and Company B, Section 2; Lowry, 316; Bonadonna, 73.
128. 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Section 2; see also *ibid.*, Alpha Company, Section 2.
129. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; "Chronicle," CG's Personal Journal, 26 March.
130. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2, Lima Company section.
131. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2; Canfield intvw; Dunahoe intvw, 27Aug08.
132. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2; 2d MEB ComdC, Section 2, p. 5; 2d Bn, 8th Mar ComdC, item 2, p. 4, item 3, p. 3-4, item 4, p. 3.
133. Finnegan intvw; Canfield intvw; Dunahoe intvw, 17Sept08.
134. 1st Bn, 10th Mar ComdC.
135. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; Kennedy intvw, 22; "Chronicle," 26 March; 1st Bn, 10th Mar ComdC; Starnes intvw.
136. "Chronicle," 26 March; 1st Bn, 10th Marines ComdC.
137. Kennedy intvw, 22-23; Starnes intvw; Canfield intvw.
138. 1st Bn, 10th Marines ComdC; Starnes intvw.
139. Kennedy intvw, 24-25.
140. Canfield intvw.
141. 2d Bn, 8th Marines ComdC, part 2; Kennedy intvw, 23-26. Maj Kennedy interviewed numerous Marines about the incident that night and the following day. See also Bonadonna's narrative, 79-84, which is based on Col Bonadonna's interviews with Capt Grunwald; Grunwald's first sergeant, 1stSgt Michael Sprague; Maj Alford, and Capt Eric Quehl, who was at the CP with elements of his Company A, 2d Combat Engineers. Maj Julian D. Alford intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 28Mar03 (MCHC); Capt Eric R. Quehl intvw with Col Bonadonna, 4Apr03 (MCHC).
142. "Chronicle," excerpt of MEF FRAGO 035-03, 27 March; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
143. Quotes from "Chronicle," TF Tarawa INTSUM, 27 March.
144. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; CentCom investigation, Grabowski testimony, p. J-85.
145. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
146. *Ibid.*
147. "Chronicle," 27, 28 March.
148. *Ibid.*, 29, 31 March.
149. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
150. *Ibid.*; "Chronicle," INTSUM for 27 and 29 March, I MEF FRAGO 040-03, 28 March; "Chronicle," 1 April.
151. Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; "Chronicle," 30, 31 March.
152. 2d Mar ComdC, 2d Bn, 8th Marines ComdC, p. II-4.
153. 1st Bn, 10th Marines ComdC; Starnes intvw.
154. *Ibid.*
155. Col Paul B. Dunahoe, comments on draft manuscript, 9Feb09, author's possession.
156. 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2; Dunahoe intvws, 27Aug08 and 17Sept08; Canfield intvw; 1st Lt. John D. Bolt, Sgt Christopher M. Sharon, and Cpl Brandon D. Maston intvw with Col Reed R. Bonadonna, 10Apr03 (MCHC), transcript, 6-11; hereafter Bolt intvw.
157. Col Paul B. Dunahoe, comments on draft manuscript, 9Feb09, author's possession.
158. *Ibid.*
159. Lowry, 362, 366, 368-69; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; 3d Bn, 2d Mar ComdC, Part 2, S-2 Intelligence.
160. Reilly intvw; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04; 1st Bn, 2d Mar ComdC.
161. "Chronicle," CG's Personal Journal, 2 April; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
162. "Chronicle," 2 April; Natonski intvw, 6Mar04.
163. "Lessons Learned," 2d Bn, 8th Mar ComdC; 3d Bn, 2dMar ComdC; 1stLt John D. Bolt, "Summary of Actions of Surveillance and Target Acquisition Platoon (STA) 3/2 During Operation Iraqi Freedom," in possession of Col Paul B. Dunahoe.
164. Finnegan intvw; Hawkins intvw.
165. Schielein intvw.
166. Bing West and MGen Ray L. Smith, *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the First Marine Division* (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), 41.
167. Reynolds, 81.

Back Cover: *The logotype reproduced on the back cover has as its major element the oldest military insignia in continuous use in the United States. It first appeared, as shown here, on Marine Corps buttons adopted in 1804. With the stars changed to five points, the device has continued on Marine Corps buttons to the present day.*

A photograph of a U.S. Marine in silhouette, standing amidst the rubble of a destroyed city. In the background, a tall, lattice-structured tower, possibly a power line tower, rises against a hazy sky. The ground is covered in debris and twisted metal. The overall tone is somber and historical.

About the Author and Acknowledgments

Colonel John R. “Rod” Andrew Jr. is professor of history at Clemson University. He earned his doctorate in history from the University of Georgia in 1997 and has published two scholarly historical monographs. He was a Marine artillery officer in Operation Desert Storm and has served nearly four years as an active-duty officer and more than 18 years in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve.

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*A U.S. Marine observes destruction in the city of Nasiriyah, April 2003.
Photo by LCpl Bryan J. Nealy*

